

Surprised by Joy: Therefore

Bishop John Schol

Introduction by Pastor David Woolverton:

Sharing the message today, we have a special guest. This is Bishop John Schol. Bishop Schol has been serving as bishop of both the eastern Pennsylvania and the greater New Jersey conferences for some time, and he actually grew up in Philadelphia, spent the majority of his life being nurtured and serving within the United Methodist Churches over those decades, primarily within the Eastern Pennsylvania conference. He and his wife, Beverly, have three children and four grandchildren. Congratulations! Prior to his being elected to the role of Bishop, Bishop Schol served as a pastor and also as executive director of the Frankford Group Ministry, the Urban Ministry Director for our denomination, and as pastor of West Chester United Methodist Church in West Chester, Pennsylvania. After his election and consecration as Bishop in 2004, he served at the Baltimore-Washington conference, and then eight years later, he was assigned to *the Greater New Jersey conference. And it shows, yet again, how good things can come out of New Jersey, into Pennsylvania.* Bishop Schol has shared many, many messages within our conference and I have been deeply moved by just about every one of them, so I am thrilled to have him here sharing the Word of God. Would you welcome Bishop John Schol?

Bishop John Schol:

Shine like the stars, the passage said! Well, let me tell you, ever since I walked through the doors, this morning, there have been nothing but stars shining in this place. The people who greeted me were just wonderful and welcomed me here. They introduced themselves to me, made sure I had everything that I needed. And this worship service, seeing what you're going to be doing in mission with your Christmas offering this season. It was inspiring. I mean, it was just inspiring! So, the stars are shining brightly in this place, and I give thanks to God for Elizabethtown and St Paul's and what God is doing in and through you. And I know it's not only at Christmas. You're out in the community doing other mission work. You're serving in many different ways. People are engaged. There are people that are coming out of this congregation for ministry and to serve in ministry. And so, as a bishop, you make my heart happy! There's joy in my heart today. So, I give thanks to God for you, I give thanks to God for your pastors, Pastor David and Pastor Matt, and everybody that's working together here to make things go.

There's such great joy today, but I do need to lament a little bit if can. You know, I thought Penn State should have won yesterday. They were so close, and then right at the end, it all fell apart. And then, of course, if any of you like me stayed up and watched the Phillies last night, it's always, you know, touch and go. But I'll tell you what. Say whatever you want about the Phillies. They've given us a good ride this season. They've given us a good ride. So that's my laments for the day.

Now we're on to joy and what God is doing in our midst and as we talk together today. Let's pray. God, we gather today, and I pray that you would open our hearts and minds to hear your word and just let it soak into us. God, I pray that you would move beyond my preparation and this congregation's expectation and

catch us by surprise with your great love and your great word for us today. All this we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

So, I know you're working with the Book of Philippians right now, and what a powerful book Philippians is. You know, Philippi is in Macedonia. It's in that region of the world. It was an urban area that people came to, a very urban area, in that time. Paul, we believe, went there on his second missionary journey. As you read Acts and some of the other passages in the New Testament, you know that Paul had at least four missionary journeys. Probably really five, but somewhere between four and five missionary journeys where he just traveled around to visit churches or to start new churches and was just a great missionary for the work of Jesus Christ. And as we know, he went to Philippi and ran into some troubles in Philippi, in that there was Lydia. Right? And Lydia, he healed her and freed her of evil spirits. Now, the town appreciated Lydia the way she was, and so, when Paul did this, they threw him into prison. And only Paul could write from prison, as we read in the fourth chapter of the Book of Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, rejoice." Now, I don't know about you. I've never been in prison. But if I were ever in prison, I'm not sure what I would be rejoicing about. But Paul could write that because Christ was so deep in his life and so alive in him that wherever he was, there was going to be joy. There was going to be hope. There was going to be God's presence. And that's just a powerful witness that Paul brings, and why this book of Philippians is such a powerful book. I invite you to read it from beginning to end and meditate on it and continue to think about it.

Now we're going to pick up again in the second chapter and particularly, how do we "be the church" in a world that is so divisive right now? How do we be the church of Jesus Christ in this world? You know, wherever we go, there just seems to be division in the world. I remember a couple of years ago when Biden and Trump were running against each other, and in the neighborhood where I live, I have this path that I walk. I love to walk, I run in the mornings. I often walk in the afternoon and walk in the evening. And there's this one street I go down and prior to the election in 2020, I noticed as I was walking down the street, somebody unfurled a huge Trump banner right on the front of their house. So, a day or two later I was walking again, and I was walking down that street and somebody else hung a big Biden banner on their house. Over the course of about a week or ten days as I walk that street, there were more banners, more flags, more lawn signs. You know, I could walk down the street and see, Trump, this house will cancel the vote in this house. And then I would walk a little further and I'd see Biden - and this house will cancel that vote. And that's just the way it was. And, you know, all these signs and everybody on this block wanted you to know who they were and who they were voting for. Have any of you ever said, I just dread going to Thanksgiving dinner because we're going to get in a heated discussion about something either in politics or in the culture or in religion? I've been hearing that more and more from people over these last several years that we are encountering this great divide and drawing lines within our culture and within our society, and it seeps into the church as well. Not St Paul's, of course, don't misunderstand me. But in churches, we also are seeing these tensions that are in the world. And so today I want to talk with you about how do we live in the midst of these tensions? How do we live in the midst of these times and be faithful as the Church of Jesus Christ in the world?

You know, before the service started, Pastor Matt had a short video interaction with those who were online. And I, too, want to welcome everybody that's online today. One of the questions that I was asked was how do we *be the church* in the world? And I said, one of the most important theological concepts of the New Testament is that we are the body of Christ. When Jesus died, what then was going to be God's influence, the presence of God in the world? And it became the church. And what the church was called was the body of Christ. Now, this is really important. This is very, very important that we who are gathered here today are

the body of Christ. And when we go out into the world, we present the body of Christ. We present Christ in the world. So, in other words, when St Paul's is out and about in the community, people ought to be able to look at us and say, oh, that's what Jesus would do. Oh, that's what Jesus would think. Oh, that's what Jesus would say. You see, that's just how important that concept is, that we are the body of Christ. And that's one of the great challenges, even for the church today, is that there are these divides happening within the church and the world looks at us and says, you are no better than we are because you can't get your act together also, in terms of living together as one.

So, we think about, and we talk about how do we live in a divisive world? The first thing I want to say is conflict is not a bad thing. Conflict is merely two ideas that are trying to share the same space. Two different ideas, trying to share the same space. It's not that one is better than the other. It's just two different ideas trying to share the same space. How do we engage in the world, in the midst of difference, that brings wholeness and peace and joy in the midst of difference? That's the challenge. It's not that we have different ideas that's the problem, it's how we engage with each other when we do have different ideas. It's, for some of us, do I really want to go to Thanksgiving dinner because Uncle Bob is going to be there and he's going to get on his drum beat again and tear everybody down? Or, fearing that we're going to get into these fights and conflicts. So how do we become the Church of Jesus Christ living in the world in the midst of differences and being but the body of Christ in the world?

So, the passage today, and I love this statement - work out your salvation in fear and trembling, as one of the translations says. "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling." Well, you know, when we think about that phrase, we're taught that we don't save ourselves. Right? It is through the life of Jesus Christ, that we are justified with God. We're made one with God because of the life of Jesus Christ, and that Jesus gave His life for us on our behalf, that we would not have to work out our salvation with God, that Jesus did that on our behalf. So, what is Paul saying when he says, "Work out your salvation in the world?" What Paul is essentially saying is Christ has done the work for us, now you must live it out in the world. How are you going to live your salvation out into the world?

So, I can tell you as a clergy person, as a pastor, as a Bishop, I've got it all worked out and my life is perfect. I want you to know that. I was serving as the pastor in Westchester, and it was an in-town, large congregation. The phone rang at two in the morning. And you know, when the phone rings at that hour, I knew that it couldn't be something good. It was the police department. They said one of my kids was at the station, and I needed to come down and pick them up. They had been with a large group of kids, and they had been drinking. Now, did I tell you I was the pastor of the in-town church in Westchester that had its own community newspaper? And so, I, the good, outwardly living Christian pastor had one thought in my head. And that was, oh my God, this could wind up in the newspaper. It had nothing to do with my children. It had nothing to do with whatever happened, it had everything to do with me, and what I was going to look like. Now, I know that none of you have ever had that kind of thought in your head, right? What is this going to mean for me? What is this going to reflect on for me? So, I went down to the police station, and I picked up my child and as we were leaving, they said, let me explain. I said, oh, no, we're not talking about this tonight. We're going to talk about this tomorrow. We got in the car and are driving home. My child says let me explain. No, we are not going to talk about this tonight. We're going to talk about it tomorrow. We get to the house. Let me explain. No, we are not talking about this tonight. We will talk about it in the morning, go to bed. So because I've been up at the police department during the night, I sleep in a little longer in the morning and when I wake up, Beverly is already up and she comes to me and says it's all worked out, I took care of it. I said what? She said, it's all worked out. It's all taken care of. So, I generally take Beverly with me whenever there's a hard problem because she is a gift from God.

But the point I want to make here is that what we do in the midst of conflict and in the midst of divisiveness is move to what's most important to us. And so when I thought *is this going to be in the newspaper?* My fear was that it was all about me. And I moved to what we sometimes called the box of *need to be seen as*. I don't know if anybody else has their box in their life but the *need to be seen as* box ... I *need the world to see me as* a good person, as the right person, as the best person, as a loving person. This is what I *need the world to see me as*. And so rather than going outward, I'm going inward. Now maybe that's not your box, but there are other boxes as well. There are boxes that are called *I deserve*. And if you have an *I deserve* box, you know that an *I deserve* box would have been saying to my child, *I don't deserve this*. I've raised you right. I have given you all these good things. *I don't deserve the way you're treating me*. *I deserve* boxes. I've done something and *I deserve* better than what I'm getting. Here's another box – the *better than and worse than* boxes. *Better than* would have been going down to the police department and saying, I'm the pastor of a large church in this congregation, and you need to treat me with respect. Or *worse than* would be to say I'm just not a good parent. I'm not served. Now, what I want to say is when any of us move to our box and sometimes, you know, with family members we are in one box and with other family, with work, with others, maybe it works *better than* if you're the boss, right? I'm better than all of you or *I deserve*. I'm not getting what I should get. All of that is moving inward. Jesus constantly moved outward. And what was so helpful about the life of Jesus and what you learned last week when it said, have this mind within you that although he was in the form of God, did not equate Himself with God, but humbled himself seeing others as better than himself. So, this is who Jesus always was. Think about the last night of Jesus's life. He's with his disciples in an upper room. And what are they doing? They're arguing with each other about who is the best? They're in there *I deserve* box. Or I'm *better than* box. And they are arguing. One of them is ready to turn Jesus in, another one denies that he ever knew him. And none of them show up when Jesus needs them most. And what is Jesus's response? I love you. I care about you. I'm going to die for you. Because that's how much I love you.

Wow. Wow. So, what Jesus could do was to see other people as children of God created by God human beings. In our world today, the reason that we're banging heads so much is that we don't see each other as people. We see each other as objects. You're either on my side or you're against me. You're either going to help me get this done or you're going to block me from getting this done. And we see people as objects. We see them in ways that objectify them, rather than through the eyes of God, which says these are beloved children who I've created. I want the best for them, and I want to do everything I can to help them be fully human. So, one of the great sins of the world is when we objectify other people and see them as an object rather than a human being created by God. That kind of outwardness is hard, hard work. It's very hard work to say *you matter just like I matter*. Your ideas matter to you just like my ideas matter to me. Your hopes and dreams matter and are just as important as my hopes and dreams. So how do we get there? Well, again, I think Jesus is the model. Jesus always put curiosity over judgment. Let me say that again. Jesus always put curiosity over judgment. In other words, Jesus would ask a question, he would get curious rather than beginning with a judgment. The woman by the well. He knew her life, He knew what was going on. So, what does He do? He begins with a question. Can I have a drink? That opens a conversation. So often we begin with judgment rather than curiosity. Jesus always began with curiosity. I want to know about you, I want to understand you. So, the neighbor across the street from me, he has a big flag hanging in his yard. And I say to him, tell me more about your flag. Tell me what you're thinking. What's important to you? And you know, when we start to get to that level, we begin that we find we have more things in common than not. And maybe we have different approaches to get there, but our hearts beat and what we want are the same.

Working out your salvation in the world is hard work. Because we're not curious, but often judging. Working out your salvation in the world is hard work because we see the other as an object rather than a person who matters just like I do. Working out our salvation in the world is hard work because humbling ourselves is a very difficult thing to do. So, I got it wrong when the police call my house at 2:00 in the morning. I got it wrong when there's somebody in the church who lashes out at me because of something the church is doing, and my tendency is to lash back out at them or tell them why they're wrong or tell them why we're right – when more importantly, sometimes it's just a question that needs to be asked that opens us up the possibility.

When I was at Westchester, I was asked to go to Zimbabwe to help lead a pastor school with a group of leaders from another annual conference. I was quite honored. I had been doing some work in Zimbabwe before that, so absolutely, I wanted to go. On one condition. That was if I could bring one or two people with me from the congregation, I was serving in. Right? They said, oh, sure, that's fine. So, I invited Scott and Jerry to go with me. Now, Scott and Jerry were middle aged men like I was at that time. I said to them, would you like to go to Zimbabwe with me and learn more about the culture there? Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely! So, you're going to have to raise your own money, okay? Oh, absolutely. Before we left, I said to them, now I want you to know that your life is going to be changed forever. And they said, oh, we know. I said, no, you need to understand your life is going to be changed forever. They said, oh, we know, John, we know. We know. I said, okay. So, we go to Zimbabwe, and they're learning a whole lot and they're engaging. After the first week, which was about halfway through our trip, they came to me and they said, John, we want you to know our lives will be changed forever. I said I know. They said, no, no, you don't understand - our lives are going to be changed forever. They saw God's children - not as objects, not as people in a nation far away. Not as Africans, but as human beings. So, when we came home, I said now you're going to have to work out your salvation, this new salvation that you found. I said, what are you going to do with what you've learned and what you've experienced? And they both went on a journey; prayer, fasting and openness to who God was calling them to be in the next part of their own salvation. Their own journey, working that out in the world. Jerry decided he was going to raise money for a scholarship so a student to go to Africa University for free. And he did it. Scott felt a call to go into ministry. Middle aged man, family, young kids. And he gave it all up, went to seminary and became a pastor. He just retired this past July.

When we see other people, not as objects, but as children of God, we are using the eyes of God. When we see other people and get out of our own boxes - the *I deserve, I'm better than, or I'm less than. What will people think of me* - when we get out of those boxes and just be completely vulnerable with people, with where they are and what their experiences are, we live Philippians chapter two, having the mind of Jesus Christ. Now, it will not always be easy, and it will not always bring you happiness, but it will bring you joy. Because happiness is about the external, helping me to feel good about something. Joy rises up from within, and it's about purpose and meaning in our life. Choose joy over happiness. Choose seeing people as children of God over seeing them as objects. Choose Philippians two when you are at your most challenged. Amen.

Will pray with me? God, you never said that if we followed Jesus, it would be easy. God, you never said that being a parent, or being a coworker or being a spouse, or being a pastor or being a church leader would be easy. But you called us. God, help us to be the person you've called us to be, filled with the great love of Jesus for those all around us. And God, when we get that call at 2 a.m. in the morning, help us just to breathe deep and say it's going to be okay, because Jesus is with me. God, I give you thanks for St

Paul's because I see Jesus in this congregation. Thank you, God, for their ministry, for their work, and for their 50-year members. All this we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.