



1 thessalonians 5:16-18

# *Sunday Worship*

## *September 20, 2020*

*Draw near to God  
for God is waiting for you.*

### *CALL TO WORSHIP*

*Come near to the Lord.*

**Lord, be with us this day.**

*Lift your sorrows and joys to the Lord.*

**Lord, hear the cries of our hearts.**

*Come, rest in the love and mercy of God.*

**Bless us, O Lord, that we may be blessings for others in your name.**

### *OPENING PRAYER*

**As we sing our praise to you, O Lord, we remember the multitude of blessings you have given us. We are mindful of the ways in which you have lifted us when we have fallen low. Be with us this day as we gather to hear your word for our lives. Amen.**

*\*HYMN #611 Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*

1. Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love!  
Hearts untold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.  
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.

2. All thy works with joy surround thee; earth and heaven reflect thy rays;  
stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise.  
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,  
chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in thee.

3. Mortals, join the happy chorus which the morning stars began.  
Love divine is reigning o'er us, joining all in heaven's plan.  
Ever singing, march we onward, victors in the midst of strife.  
Joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life.

### *CALL TO RECONCILIATION*

*We continue to believe that we must earn our way into God's heart. But God's grace is given to each of us, for all of us, freely, unconditionally, always. Open your life to this mercy.*

### *PRAYER OF CONFESSION*

**Like our fathers and mothers of faith, we complain, O God. In this wilderness that is 2020, this year, this time, this place, filled with disaster, upheaval and discord, we complain. In traffic. At the store. On social media. Out loud, to our spouses and kids, to our family and friends, our colleagues and coworkers, in our heart of hearts, to ourselves, and to you, Sacred Presence, we complain.**

**We complain about how much we miss the way things used to be, about how much we hate the way things are, and about our concern for what unspeakable horrors may be coming next. And then we complain about complaining.**

**Even as they voiced their complaints, Moses tells Aaron to tell the people, “Draw near. Draw near to the Lord, for God has heard.” You do not abandon or ignore, Creator God, you draw near. You listen. You hear. You hear the fear, the concern, the anger, the frustration, the embarrassment, the grief, the yearning for connection that is underneath and within our complaints. You hear. You listen. You draw near.**

**Forgive us, Author of Life, for our complaints, and for pulling away from your compassion and care. Tune our hearts to your Presence that we may draw near to you, and in turn, with open ears and listening spirits, draw near and be present to others. Amen.**

#### *WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE*

*Our God is full of mercy and grace, slow to anger, and rich in love. When we fall, God is there to help us up again. When we find ourselves burdened by past events and circumstances, God comes alongside to support and encourage us. God is always close at hand, ready to listen when we call out to him. God hears our prayers, and answers them. So be at peace. God has heard your prayer. Remember your baptism: **Jesus died for me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me. Amen.***

#### *OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Exodus 16:2-15*

<sup>2</sup>The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

<sup>4</sup>Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. <sup>5</sup>On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” <sup>6</sup>So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, <sup>7</sup>and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” <sup>8</sup>And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.”

<sup>9</sup>Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” <sup>10</sup>And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. <sup>11</sup>The Lord spoke to Moses and said, <sup>12</sup>“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

<sup>13</sup>In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup>When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

#### *NEW TESTAMENT LESSON Philippians 1:21-30*

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

<sup>27</sup> Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup> For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— <sup>30</sup> since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

*SERMON "Finding Joy"*

From 1969 - 1971 there was the TV show called *Hee Haw*. Maybe you remember it. There were a series of skits. A regular feature took place in a barber shop where Archie Campbell played the barber and Roy Clark was the customer. While Archie was cutting Roy's hair they would get to talking. One of their famous skits went like this:

*Archie:* Hey Roy, I guess you heard about my terrible misfortune. *Roy:* No, Archie, what happened?

*Archie:* Well, my great uncle died. *Roy:* Oh that's bad!

*Archie:* No that's good! *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* Well, when he died, he left me 50,000 dollars. *Roy:* Oh that's good!

*Archie:* No that's bad! *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* When the Internal Revenue got through with it, all I had left was 25,000 dollars. *Roy:* That's bad.

*Archie:* No that's good. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* Well Roy, I took the \$25,000, bought me an airplane, and I learned to fly. *Roy:* Well that's good.

*Archie:* No that's bad. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* Well, I was flying upside down the other day, and I fell out of the darn thing. *Roy:* Well that's bad.

*Archie:* No that's good. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* When I looked down I saw a great big ole haystack underneath me. *Roy:* Well that's good.

*Archie:* No that's bad. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* Well, when I got a little closer, I saw a pitchfork aimed right at me. *Roy:* Well that's bad.

*Archie:* No that's good. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* I missed the pitchfork. *Roy:* Well that's good.

*Archie:* No that's bad. *Roy:* How come?

*Archie:* Because, Roy, I missed the haystack too.

How do you look at life – bad or good? Are you one of those folks who looks at the glass as half full or half empty? Some people look negatively and see what is missing (the glass is half empty), while other people look positively and see what is there (the glass is half full). The first is the pessimist and the second is the optimist. Research has found that those who see the half full glass are happier, healthier and wealthier.

You know the children's story about a little girl named Pollyanna and she remained excessively sweet-tempered and optimistic even in the face of adversity. She believed that good things are more likely to happen than bad things, even when it was very unlikely. And surprisingly, GOOD THINGS HAPPENED!

There is a lesson in that. If you start your day expecting more of the same old, same old ... that is probably what will happen. If you always see the negative in everything, you will get what you see. If, on the flip side, you look for the positive side of everything all day, you are going to have a much better time of it and enjoy your day.

Harry Truman said, "A pessimist is one who makes DIFFICULTIES of his opportunities and an optimist is one who makes OPPORTUNITIES of his difficulties."

It's a matter of choice ... if you are expecting good things to happen you will tend to take the actions that will produce positive results. When you are expecting things to go wrong, you often fail to take steps that would have avoided or prevented the bad result!

Coaches of winning teams have this positive attitude: Even when they lose, the coach treats it as a learning experience that will enable them to win future games.

That is exactly what is happening in the letter Paul wrote to the Philippians. Paul started this church in Philippi and was very fond of them. This letter is said to be the most unabashedly affectionate of Paul's letters. Scholars say that this is an example of writing that is typical of friendship written to strengthen the bonds of affection between author and recipient. There is apparent deep affection between Paul and the Philippians as he writes in response to their concern and fears regarding his imprisonment. Yes, Paul writes this letter from prison. He has been in prison at least three different times in three different places. Not only that, his service to Jesus Christ led to his being beaten with rods, flogged, stoned, had his authority questioned and on one missionary journey, he was shipwrecked. Now in his current dire situation, he is thinking about the possibility of his impending death at the hands of the Roman authorities. It is uncertain whether he will be released and able to visit his beloved congregation again.

Paul carries more than his share of difficult baggage. Sitting in that prison cell, you would expect him to feel helpless, caged, at the mercy of an unstable, temperamental and corrupt empire. Certainly he would be justified in singing the blues expressing anger, depression and possibly defeat. The glass would very much appear to be half empty right about now.

But that isn't how Paul sees it. Paul sees the glass that has been placed before him as half full. He remains surprisingly joyful despite his surroundings and his uncertainty about his fate.

Alyce McKenzie makes the observation that the phrase "Thanks a lot!" is one that can be offered sincerely with a smile. Or it can be offered sarcastically with a grimace. "Thanks a lot!" reads the note from a friend from church to whom meals were delivered after she got home from the hospital. It means she enjoyed the casserole and the apple pie dropped off at her door. "Thanks a lot!" is also something that might be said to someone who insults us or gives us an added chore we hadn't factored into our day.

In this passage from Philippians, Paul is offering a sincere, non-sarcastic "Thanks a lot" to God. For what? For the glass half full, the privilege, not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well. He is thanking God for the privilege of being in prison. Most of us wouldn't view being imprisoned, shipwrecked, and beaten as a privilege. Most of us don't view the sacrifices we make to put others ahead of ourselves and to make their lives better a pure privilege. Oh, on our best days we do, but in between we do some complaining. Someone once said, "I can handle almost anything as long as I can whine about it."

But Paul isn't whining here in prison. He is actually smiling, giving thanks and taking it a step further, almost bragging that he has the *opportunity* to suffer for his faith.

If I were Paul I might be saying to God "Thanks a lot!" in that sarcastic mode, with a grimace on my face. The sincere, smiling version would have to wait until I was released and back in fellowship hall having cookies and coffee after church with the Philippians. Often we wait for the right time and place to praise God, the opportune

circumstances. We want to serve God and use our abilities to help others, but we prefer that it be under convenient conditions.

Paul is transparent here. He admits that he would personally prefer death to his current hardship. "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."

For Paul, the old real estate dictum, "Location is everything," doesn't apply. When it comes to selling houses and the success of restaurants, location is almost everything. But it makes little difference to Paul. He is able to claim joy wherever he is. Christ will be exalted in his body whether he lives or dies.

For Paul, it is like looking at a pile of 100 one dollar bills or a pile of 10,000 pennies. Choosing between the two, you still come out with \$100!

So it is whether he lives in Christ or dies in Christ, he is with his Savior. Living, he is able to serve Christ and in so doing help the Philippians and other followers. Dying in Christ would be a wonderful thing to go to rest in the bosom of the Lord. But he dismisses the idea of "departure" in favor of service, living a life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

With this proclamation, Paul shifts gears. It isn't enough for him to see the glass half full, he desires this for his good friends as well. He wants them to also rejoice in the midst of their own circumstances because even as they read this, they knew that Paul's fate could become theirs as well.

As Paul looks at the glass half full, Paul is challenging others to find joy and hope in their difficult situation. Bette Midler in her song "The Rose" seems to chastise those who are so afraid of dying they never learn to live. Life happens, yet we have become so complacent and take things so for granted that when the hard times come, these bad incidents become like prisons that snuff out our life.

We are called to live life with hope, looking for the glass half full. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* talks about how people find meaning in life and the importance of this fruitful search for a life of hope and joy (glass half full). In explaining the phenomena of the concentration camps, where hundreds of prisoners gave in to just dozens of soldiers, Frankl speaks of the loss of hope, which robs people of their will to live and to face life's difficulties. "People start dying when they lose hope," Frankl said. "That was why the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 'Work Creates Freedom,' which was written over the entrance of the first German concentration camp at Dachau, could have more appropriately been replaced by the words from Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Abandon hope, all who enter this place."

Frankl speaks of the freedom we possess that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God's will that we experience life and not death.

We are called to choose life. Paul speaks of the struggle between wanting to embrace death, which would allow him to be in the presence of Christ, and to stay in life, which would allow him to continue to witness to the power of the resurrected Jesus. Paul chooses life.

Sometimes our eyes are so focused heavenward, waiting for our resurrection and "true life," that we miss in our present life the opportunities for the abundant life to which Christ calls us. We know that tomorrow holds promises of hope and joy. Our God, though, is also in our present, challenging us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope and see the glass half full.

These past seven months we have been in a prison of sorts, unable to socialize in ways that we would like, unable to go to work or church or school in the way that we would like, unable to care for the needs of others in the way that we would like, unable to BREATHE in the way that we would like. It's been hard. It's been frustrating. It's been depressing and we have gotten angry. If that isn't bad enough, there's also been the

political tension, the environment tension, the economic tension and the justice tension. I've heard more than one person say this is as bad, or worse, than it has ever been. It is so easy to have a glass half empty frame of mind.

Paul would urge us to look at the glass as half full. Think of the "silver linings" you have experienced these past seven months.

Prisons, of any kind, can be scary places. They can be places of lost hope and death. Prison wasn't the best place for Paul. Nevertheless, the Bible speaks of how prisons became places of worship and proclamation when the first Christians ended up there for their faithfulness. Under the most difficult of situations, they chose to look to God and not to their circumstances.

How do we find hope and meaning in life? Gilberto Collazo said, "it all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances." Paul in his prison cell was able to look beyond the dank walls and see the opportunity to encourage and teach young communities of faith. We are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning, the half full glass. There is no need to abandon hope. God will lead us out of our prisons by placing a half full glass before us. Pick it up and drink. That's God's invitation for you today. It's easy to see the half empty glass of life, but can you see the half full? In the midst of all that you are living through, choose life. Amen.

#### *PRAYER OF INTERCESSION*

God, we have known your love experienced in your care and provision. Your steadfast love endures forever. We are called to extend that love to the world around us—to care for others as deeply as we care for ourselves. So we bring the needs of our world before you now.

We pray for those who do not have what they need in order to survive; those without enough food to eat, or shelter to keep them warm; those without employment, or enough money to pay their bills; those without access to medical care, or medicine to keep them healthy.

We pray for those who have more than enough to meet their needs, but who continue to feel empty inside; who struggle to find meaning and purpose in life, who engage in destructive behaviors to try and hide the pain,

We pray for those who are struggling physically, who have lost possessions and homes due to wild fire or hurricane and floods, who lay aside their own safety for the welfare and needs of others, who are battling life-threatening disease or injury, who are living with chronic pain, who are coping with Alzheimers, or facing death.

God of the first and the last, and all those in between, your grace reaches out to all of us—life-long believers or newcomers alike. You call us to live as citizens of heaven, to work together with one mind and one purpose, to reach out in love to those in need. Strengthen us so that we might live in a manner worthy of the Good News we have received, offering our lives to the building up of your upside-down kingdom, where the last are first, and the first are last, and there is grace enough for all. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.

#### *HYMN #846 Fight the Good Fight*

1. Fight the good fight with all thy might.  
Christ is thy strength and Christ thy right.  
Lay hold on life, and it shall be  
thy joy and crown eternally.

2. Run the straight race through God's good grace;  
lift up thine eyes, and seek Christ's face.  
Life with its way before us lies;  
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.

3. Cast care aside; lean on thy guide.  
God's boundless mercy will provide.  
Trust, and thy trusting soul shall prove  
Christ is its life, and Christ its love.

4. Faint not nor fear: God's arms are near.  
God changeth not, and thou art dear.  
Only believe, and thou shalt see  
That Christ is all in all to thee.

*BENEDICTION*

Go out in the strength of God's gracious gifts. Live lives worthy of the gospel of Christ. Stand firm in one spirit. Strive with one mind for the faith of the gospel. And may the power and the presence of God go with you. May the Call of Christ lead you into fruitful labor. And may the Holy Spirit fill you with the joy of grace. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.