**Sermon 7/7/19**

**Philippians 1:3-20**

         He said he wanted to be a member of the church.

         He described what he wanted like this:

I would like to buy about three dollars' worth of gospel, please.

Not too much - just enough to make me happy, but not so much that I get addicted.

I don't want so much gospel that I learn to really hate prejudice and lust.

I certainly don't want so much that I start to love my enemies,

          cherish self-denial, and contemplate missionary service in some alien culture.

I want ecstasy, not repentance.

I want transcendence, not transformation.

I would like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people,

        but I myself don't want to love those who are different from me.

I would like enough gospel to make my family secure, and my children well behaved,

          but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected,

         or my giving too greatly enlarged.

I would like about three dollars' worth of gospel, please.

How would you respond?

None of us puts it quite like this, do we?

Yet sometimes, we act as though we want all the benefits of salvation,

           but few - or none - of the responsibilities.

We want to pick and choose what we would like in our relationship with God,

           and feel free to decline what we don't want to do.

Paul would have been shocked, despairing, and convinced

         that this person was giving up the most important parts of the Gospel,

         all the joy of the good news.

The most joyous book in the Bible, Paul's letter to the Philippians,

           came from the pen of an author chained to a Roman Guard.

Many scholars believe he wrote this letter about the time

       Nero began tossing Christians to ravenous lions,

       and burning them as torches to illuminate his banquets.

How could a rational man devote a letter to the topic of joy,

          while his survival was in serious jeopardy?

In such an environment, how could joy possibly thrive?

Yet, notice how Paul can find joy in any circumstances,

           Joy, when it is least expected.

Joy. The word has a quick, happy ring to it.

Yet it, like other words, has been drained of meaning over the years,

           even tapped as a name for a dishwashing detergent.

Nowadays joy is used most commonly for a sensation like thrill.

We think of joy as something you save up for months to experience,

       and then splurge on a moment of exhilaration: a trip to Disney world,

       a heart-stopping ride on the world's meanest roller coaster,

       a parachute jump, a hot-air balloon ride.

Paul had a different understanding of the word, as this letter reveals.

To Paul joy was much more important and wonderful

          than simple happiness, delight, pleasure, enjoyment.

Joy came from God, and it could overcome all pain, suffering, and despair.

His letter to the Philippians is full of joy and rejoicing.

It is a good book to read whenever we are full of despair, have lost all hope,

        and feel like giving up.

Philippians uses the word joy or rejoice every few paragraphs, but the joy it describes

          doesn't vanish after your heart starts beating normally again.

Rejoice, says Paul, when someone selfishly tries to steal the limelight from you.

          And when you meet persecution for your faith.

          And when you are facing death.

Paul points to the death and resurrection of Jesus

         to show that God can take even the darkest moment in history

        and turn it into good.

The empty tomb proves that nothing is powerful enough to stamp out

           a reason for joy – joy in the Lord.

God is even stronger than death, and that makes a Christian's joy indestructible.

Thus even the normally depressing state of imprisonment didn't bother Paul.

Even when Paul stayed in jail for long periods,

           God used the experience to advance the gospel.

As he wrote Philippians, he must have recalled his first visit to Philippi.

As he wrote Philippians, conversions were occurring among

        the Roman palace soldiers, forced by guard duty

        to overhear Paul's daily ministry.

Paul could find victory in jail.

And the Gospel continued to spread.

The Christian church hasn't had a perfect record throughout history.

If you take a random sample of adjectives people use to describe the church,

          the list will likely include such labels as:

         judgmental, narrow, racist, divided, pompous.

The church of Jesus Christ has fallen far short of the ideals he entrusted to it.

Sometimes so far short that we may forget what the church is supposed to look like.

Problems existed from the beginning: Paul's letters to Galatia, Corinth, and Colosse,

          flame with indignation against defects in the early church.

Occasionally, however, a church came along which worked, against all odds.

Philippi was one of those rare congregations.

He rejoiced in their love and thoughtfulness.

He often said: "I thank my God every time I remember you."

When others failed, these friends didn't.

Philippians is simple and straightforward.

It is not a formal treatise, but a warm letter to friends, a personal letter,

         a letter intended for all believers.

From its birth, the church in Philippi had three strikes against it.

Its first recorded converts were an Asiatic Jewish merchant,

            a Greek slave girl employed as a sideshow fortune-teller,

         and a gruff Roman jailer (Acts 16).

Yet more than a decade later, when Paul wrote to the church, he could

         hardly find words warm enough to express his pride and affection.

The Philippians held on to the true Gospel Paul had taught them.

They shared the faith with everyone they encountered.

And they supported and loved one another, building each other up in the gospel.

Paul wrote Philippians mainly as a thank-you for all that his friends had done.

Its bright happy tone reflects the fondness he felt for his favorite church.

Nevertheless, Paul couldn't resist an opportunity to give some fatherly advice.

In a fireside chat tone, he warned of encroaching dangers:

          divisions, a strain of perfectionism, and inroads by those who wished

          to turn Christians back to the Jewish faith.

Always, though, he returned to his underlying theme of joy,

       an emotion that seemed to come easily when Paul remembered the Philippians.

Shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, Paul had seen the down side of life.

He had also known prosperity.

Both, he suggests, offer temptations.

But Paul had discovered a secret for contentment in all situations:

          his deeply personal sense of living in Christ.

In this he found strength to handle anything.

Jesus told us:

          These things I have spoken to you that My joy may remain in you,

          and that your joy may be complete.

Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

Sometimes we need to be reminded just how much He loves us,

          and what He did for us.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are God’s children.

And sometimes we need to be reminded to act like it.

Then we can experience the joy and peace God offers.

Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!"

            Rejoice: It is a choice!

           We can choose joy.

AMEN