Whenever I hear these ringing words of Paul - *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice* - it takes me a minute to let them sink in, to remember that he isn’t in the midst of a congregation or at the height of a mountaintop but rather in a jail cell, imprisoned, dictating his letter to a community weary and afraid, growing doubtful that their newfound Christian faith would or even *could* sustain them. From a bird’s eye view, it could not have looked worse.

But looking from the seat of his soul, all Paul could see was the occasion to rejoice. A New Testament scholar wrote, “Clearly Paul does not have in view the kind of superficial happiness that manifests itself only when things go well. No, it is a rejoicing that can be had always, because it depends not on changing circumstances but on the one who does not change: ‘Rejoice in the Lord.’ Paul repeats the command with reference to the future: ‘again I will say, rejoice!’ It is as though the apostle anticipated some natural objections - ‘How can we possibly rejoice given our circumstances?’ and sensed the need to reiterate the command.”

But really - how can we *possibly* rejoice?
It seems difficult many, many days, doesn’t it?
My friend Carol would wryly laugh about how it felt to open the newspaper or flip through her phone every morning asking, “What fresh hell do we have today?”
New diagnoses. Children at risk.
Friends in pain. Families torn asunder.
Storms destroying. Heat and fires raging.
Disparaging remarks. Ye even death.
Again I will say: Rejoice!

In the tragedy that turns what was to what will never be the same...
the stress that mounts within,
the stories that go untold and the stories we tell ourselves...
pressing forward with *joy* seems somewhat...ridiculous.

And you know how ridiculous children can be.

The columnist Erma Bombeck once told a story about a time in church when she noticed a small child who was turning around in her pew - smiling at everyone. She wrote, “He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and in a stage whisper that could be heard in a little theater off Broadway said, ‘Stop

---

grinning! You’re in a church!” With that, she gave him a belt on his hind side and as the tears rolled down his cheeks added, ‘that’s better,’ and returned to her prayers.”

Again I will say: Rejoice!

What is it in us that resists joy?

That makes us unable to participate in the goodness pouring out all around?

When I want to be, I am a real un-joy to be with - I am prone to anger and snippiness, to fussing about anything and everything. To be fair, some things seem fuss-worthy: the mess in the playroom or our family’s inability to get out of the house on time. That’s minutiae and that’s also my own anxiety. How about people feeling isolated or left out or left behind? And what about the mounting rise of mental illness in children and youth and veterans? And the lack of food in Bulloch County and our staggering poverty rate? And violence done in Jesus’ name? And the damage our habits wreak upon this earth? There is so much to fuss about. So much.

Again I will say: Rejoice!

There is a profound difference in posture between me and Paul. One of us is imprisoned and one of us is free.

From the seat of his jail cell, Paul knows that the secret to his freedom should not be kept silent but rather bears repeating again and again and so he writes to his beloved friends to tell them a truth that will last: this world, this swirling and strange world, is what it is. Yes, you are surrounded by it and indeed, a part of it. But there is another way. What I’m telling you will be for always and forever. It is from everlasting to everlasting. The peace of God will be with you if you but do this: Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the One who made you. Rejoice and you will find a foothold in all this chaos that tries to knock you down.

For it is our Creator who wakes you with the sun and gives you rest by night. Who brought you friendships and community so you could learn what covenant may be, and so you would know what love looked like in relationship.

It is our Redeemer who refused false boundaries and befriended the weary, the questionable, the curious, the lost.

Who, with his own body, showed a boundless love that this swirling and strange world tried to stop but could not hold down.

It is our Sustainer who beckons you to be free and who is at work among you even in the midst of this. Who pours out upon the waters of baptism and the table of bread and cup so that you might know love is found in ordinary things made sacred when shared.

Rejoice in the Lord, I said.

That is where you’ll find joy. And that, that is your strongest resistance. Use it.
At age 86, Huang Yung-fu, was all alone in a broken-down apartment. In 1949, Huang fled to Taiwan with two million troops and families fleeing from China at the end of the Chinese Civil War. He continued to serve in the military until 1978, getting shot twice, leaving him critically wounded. Upon retirement, he moved into a small village on the outskirts of Taichung, one of Taiwan’s largest cities.

This village was where his people were, his military community. See, “military families were housed in ‘military dependents’ villages’ throughout the island. These hastily built dwellings were meant to be a makeshift place for soldiers to lay low until the Nationalists could retake the mainland. That time never came, and over the years, these temporary dwellings became permanent.”

But about 10 years ago, the Taiwanese government wanted to knock down the village to build a modern apartment complex. Since Huang was the only remaining resident, he was offered money to leave. But instead, Huang picked up a paintbrush - something he hadn’t done since childhood.

It started with a wall in his apartment. He painted a small bird in his bedroom and hasn’t stopped painting since. Huang is now affectionately called “Rainbow Grandpa” and the once hastily built dwellings “Rainbow Village.”

Rainbow Grandpa wakes up at 4am every morning to paint and greets 1.25 million people a year who come through his village which now - because of a petition started by a college student who befriended Rainbow Grandpa - is a public park. He has painted tens of thousands of illustrations - on the ground, the roofs, the walls, the ceilings, the lamp shades. There are birds and animals and people and flowers and hearts. There are colors radiant and sure. And all of them reflect his memories of childhood - there are paintings of his first puppy and his favorite teachers, of playing with his brothers. Of the things that last.

Now 96, Rainbow Grandpa is getting a little weary of body but not of spirit. He says, “If I can get up and paint tomorrow, I will. If I can’t, I will feel good knowing that this place will stay and make others happy.”

Rejoice in the Lord, Paul said. That is where we’ll find joy. In the things that last. In love, in community, in using our gifts. That is where we’ll find joy. And that, that is the strongest resistance we have.

---