

Readings: Philippians 4.1-9  
A PENTECOST 18  
Emmanuel Friedens Church  
12. October 2014

“Durable Joy and Everyday Constancy”  
Lynn Carman Bodden

As I drove west on Friday morning, Alan Chartock and WAMC were in the full throes of fund-raising, Alan overtired and as full of beans as I remember from nearly thirty years ago when we lived in Chicopee, MA. His manic silliness and joy at reaching financial goals was fun for a while, but eventually I needed something more substantial. I happened on a station airing “Democracy Now,” and an interview of three young activists involved in planning this weekend’s events in St. Louis and Ferguson, MO. In the litany of young black men killed by police within the past several months, and the pointed analysis of our culture, I heard not only pain and anger, but also hope as these three – musicians and poets – spoke of their calling to step out as leaders in their community, as leaders in a growing movement, as leaders in this critical time.

By the end of this weekend, there will have been marches and demonstrations in Ferguson and St. Louis, remembrances of the Dred Scott decision (Dred Scott having filed his case in St. Louis), calls to move from that tainted past into a new future and civil disobedience actions. But there will also have been concerts and worship services and reasons for people to join together to build community: opportunities to dig deep for the joy that will see us all through troubled times. In the days ahead, each of us and all of us need to do our part to keep the dialogue about racism and power and fear and hope going, and to keep joy alive alongside honest disappointment, real confusion and deep hurt in

the midst of this challenging conversation about ongoing racism, fear of the other, and abuse of power and the action that must follow.

Reaching for a durable joy and holding fast to it in our everyday lives is one way to witness to the presence and promise of the risen Christ in an often gritty world.

How many of you receive the UCC Daily Devotional? How many of you have ever heard of it? The Daily Devotional is an email reflection on a passage of scripture by a member of the UCC Writers Group. On Monday Vince Amlin, Associate Minister at the United Church of Gainesville, Georgia happened to write about this morning's passage from Philippians. He observed in the lives of members of a bible study he leads that watching the news – or listening to it, for that matter – can have a toxic impact. There's so much in the world we feel powerless to change, not just events in MO and elsewhere in this country, but the devastation of the ebola virus in western Africa which has now also killed a man in Texas, the constancy of reports about suicide bombers and ISIS incursions and our nation's air strikes in the Middle East, the accounts of missing and murdered students in Mexico, word of a smoking volcano in Indonesia.

Amid stories of fires and floods, commentary on poverty and politicians slinging mud, racism, sexism, heterosexism, jingoism, it's easy to be snagged by bad news. Fear and anxiety and anger and sadness drag us down, and they can chew us up and spit us out. Bad news doesn't come to us only through world or local events. Perhaps you are like me: Bad news can come when someone says something critical; it stays with me. I've noticed over the years that this happens to church communities as well. We tend to focus on what we don't have, what isn't going right, what isn't as good as it used to be or

as good as what the church down the street has going. Vince Amlin, the devotional guy, wrote truth: “Bad news piles up until we feel paralyzed with powerlessness.”

But Vince observed that happily we can make another choice, the apostle Paul’s choice: “Paul advocates a different strategy: share good news.” Share the good news. Reach for the joy. Find it in the every day. Let it touch you, shape you, shine through you.

Paul acknowledges his awareness that a couple church leaders, good women Euodia and Syntyche, have some problems with each other. He doesn’t reveal what the difficulty is, whether one of them is being controlling, or the other is being obtuse; whether they are having a theological difference, or competing for the affection of the same individual, or just getting in each other’s way in the household. Paul simply calls them to be of the same mind, to remember their call and common struggles in Christ’s name, to think about what they share more fervently than what divides them. Whatever is true and honorable and just and pleasing, my dear friends and co-workers, Euodia and Syntyche, Paul accents, think about that!

It’s striking that Paul pens some of the most encouraging words in any of his letters from the confines of a prison cell, at a great distance from this congregation that he loves. Although his situation is somber and even bleak, despite a lonely present and uncertain future, Paul is filled with a sense of joy as lively as the Spirit of Pentecost and as passionately fiery. He whose life is at risk calls his friends and companion followers of Christ to rejoice – to rejoice always! He summons them to find joy in the everyday, in common, even little things – to be disciplined about seeking the presence of God in whatever good they observe or experience: “[B]eloved, whatever is true, whatever is

honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Think about the good things. Share the good news.

Perhaps you, like Paul, experience the nearness of God and possess his kind of joy. If so, I hope you share it as boldly as he does. Perhaps you have witnessed a depth of faith and durability of joy in someone else, one who can inspire a whole community.

I am profoundly aware of the promise of joy faith holds out to us whenever I sing the hymn we just sang together. Perhaps you know the story behind it. Horatio Spafford, the author, was a Chicago businessman who suffered tremendous financial losses as a result of the Great Fire of 1871. In 1873, he and his family planned to relocate to Europe for health reasons, and in the fall he sent his wife and four daughters ahead of him, intending to follow soon. On November 23, their vessel, *Ville du Havre*, was struck by an English ship. The four girls were drowned. As a grieving Spafford made his way to join his wife in December, the captain of the ship he was on was able to point out the spot where the accident had occurred. At that place, at that moment this text flowed from Spafford’s heart and pen. Like Paul from prison, even in his greatest grief, Spafford was awake to a durable joy in the nearness of God and able to proclaim what was commendable and worthy of praise.

One of the organizers of the activities in St. Louis this weekend will be carrying the joy of a mentor with him. Her name is Grace Lee Boggs, and she’s been an activist for over seventy years. Once a teacher at the University of Chicago who face discrimination as a woman of color – a Chinese American, an advocate for tenants’ rights, women’s rights, and civil rights, Boggs married an African-American auto worker

and activist and lived most of her life working for justice in Detroit. The organizer speaking about her noted: she could see hope in a vacant lot! If you know Detroit at all, you'll know that's a lot of hope.... But it reveals an ability to find joy in the everyday, to seek hope in the commonplace, to orient toward good news and new life and what is true and commendable and worthy of praise. Today, as she listens to news of those she has marched alongside and mentored, her hope for the future wells up from her hospice bed, life, joy shining.

Emmanuel Friedens, there is joy all around today. I know from my time with you at the retreat a few weeks ago that there are many honorable, excellent, true, just and visionary things about this church. I know you will reach out of a commendable past to find new opportunities to witness to the joy that is in you in this city. There are gifts and talents in this community that reveal the nearness of God. Of course not everything is perfect, not whole, not all God knows we can be – and we could expend energy lamenting what we don't have and where we fall short. OR we can choose what some refer to as an attitude of gratitude, and be a community that accepts the discipline of living together with a sense of abundance and true joy. To believe that God is very near to us, empowering and blessing us, can fill us with a joy that is durable and palpable and unrestrained and available in times of trial. Discovering joy in being God's people begins in the everyday things: in taking the time to know each other and to cherish what is good, in willingness to care for each other by overlooking the small stuff, by daring to name the rubs but with hope, by seeking commonality while not shrinking from the struggles. It begins in believing every day is a gift – even when there is hard work to be done.

God has sent you a new pastor who, I can tell you honestly, is finding joy in your midst. By your gifts of kind words and generous care, I sense you are finding joy in the possibilities of what can yet unfold in this new relationship. May you live together appreciating the good in the smallest things, building on everyday acts of kindness and mercy, reaching – marching, crying out, acting for justice in this city and in the world. May the God of peace fill you with all joy and hope in believing – for God is near and the world is being made new. Thanks be to God. Amen.