



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

September 25, 2016

"Joy in the Midst of Trials" (Real Faith for Real People Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

We begin a new series this Sunday. I will kick it off for this week and next week. The series is called, "Real Faith for Real People". I think we all desire a faith that is real, dependable, and has real answers for real questions, especially when we hit the turbulence in life. We don't want simplistic guidelines, nor do we want something that is hyper-religious or pie in the sky. We want authenticity and truth and wisdom.

Our sermon series until December will be on the Book of James, which is in the New Testament. It was written by none other than the brother of Jesus. The context is for those who are going through hard times, turbulent times, times of suffering. If you or your loved ones are going through a tough time, you are in the right place.

First, a little history of this book. James was writing to all the Jewish Christians who had been persecuted and scattered out of Jerusalem into non-Christian areas, also known as Gentile countries. The letter was written around 50 AD, and later selected to be one of the books in the Bible, making it one of the earliest books in the Bible. It was sent out right after Stephen, a deacon, the first martyr, was killed.

Unlike today, the early Christians didn't have the network

of established Christian churches that they could turn to for support, so James wrote them in a pastoral way to encourage them to keep the faith during this time of persecution. Hence, these Christians, who were facing arrest and death, truly needed real faith.

Knowing all of this, here is our Scripture reading today from the first chapter of James, and we are going to look at just the first four verses of James chapter one written to these dispersed Christians.

James 1:1 - James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

2 - My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance;

4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

There you have it. Let's look at just the second verse for now.

"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy..."

Now some of you may be thinking, "Wait a minute Dan. You said this would be practical, real, authentic. And there you go saying something that doesn't make sense: 'Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.'"

That sounds incredible, I know. It sounds crazy. And not only does it say whenever you face trials, but it also says whenever you face trials of ANY kind you should see joy. Really? Really? How can I trust a Bible that says such gibberish? Actually, by the end of this message, hopefully you will see this is all true—hard to hear but true.

First of all, when James wrote about their trials, he was talking about heart-rendering, heart-breaking stuff. The first-century Christians were being persecuted. Stephen, a deacon and one of their leaders, had just been stoned to death. They were running for their lives. They were going to foreign countries where they didn't know the language or the culture. They had left loved ones. They feared for their children.

I get the Black Lives Matter movement. Imagine how African-American parents must worry for their children. Can we not have a peaceful Bible study in Charleston without the fear of a man coming in and shooting us?

Can my child walk down a street without the fear of either an assailant or a policeman shooting us? Can I have my 12-year-old child play in a park by himself, like in Cleveland, without being shot because of his or her color? Can we not? Can we not?

For the 50 AD Jewish Christians who were continually in danger, they were probably thinking, "CAN WE NOT have hope in this Jesus we have chosen to follow? Our families are in trouble!" But James is saying this incredibly seemingly illogical thing: "Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials." Joy?

Well, first let's define the kind of joy James is talking about. It's not joy that is happy-go-lucky where you are bouncing, skipping along. It's not a happiness just based on feelings. It's not a peaches-and-cream kind of fluffy fun. No, the joy that the Bible talks about is this: "peace, strength, and optimism from God that sustains in the ups and downs of life."

It's UNLIKE happiness, which is like a roller coaster and is dependent on circumstances. Joy in the Lord knows that ultimately He is in control and He can always bring good out of bad. Joy in the Lord has optimism that somehow, no matter how dark the tunnel, there will eventually be light at the end of it. Joy in the Lord is saying that somehow God will use this horrible bad in my life for good. If only I can wait to see how it plays out, if only I can trust.

Remember how I say the words "Jerry Coffee"? It's my code phrase to say that for every bad thing that happens God can bring something good out of it. Remember how I taught you the phrase "the King has

one more move"? That was to remind us that Jesus the King can always bring good out of bad.

The last two months have probably been the most challenging time in my pastorate. Some real trials and big projects. So happy that more than \$1.3 million has been pledged for our Acts 1:8 capital appeal, which started in August. We want all families to be part of it, so know that we are still welcoming pledges of any amount.

I was exhausted after the Acts 1:8 Appeal, and by God's grace Pam and I were able to go to Italy with half of our way being paid by an outside source. In Italy I encountered a small incident that is kind of a metaphor for this talk. We were able to attend a Papal audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican along with maybe 20 to 50,000 other people.

The Pope was going to arrive at 10:00 am and give a short speech. There was security all around including the Swiss Guards. Designed by Michelangelo himself, their uniform will now be the new uniform of our church ushers. Just kidding.

At 9:25 am I left our church tour group to go to the restroom, which was about 80 yards away. When I started to come back some guy in a dark suit with an earpiece stopped me and said I could go no further and they pulled a wooden barrier in front of me. I told them that I was leading a tour group and I needed to get back to them somewhere in the 200th row. He said I couldn't.

But I said, "I am the tour leader I need to get back there." He then said, "You can't cross this barrier because the Pope is coming."

The Pope? Wait a minute. He is not supposed to arrive until 10 am and it's only 9:30 am. The guy next to me said, "This new Pope. He does everything different. He is coming out early."

And sure enough in the distance I could see the Pope mobile with Pope Francis standing in it coming our way! I was going to have a front row spot because I was right at the railing of the pathway of where he was coming! I was considering it all joy that I was prevented from doing what I had planned.

The crowd went crazy shouting, "Viva Il Papa, Viva Il Papa" meaning "Long Live the Pope, the Holy Father." It was like Bono arriving at a U2 concert or, if you are older, it was like Mick Jagger at a Stones concert, or, if you are younger, it's like Taylor Swift arriving for her show.

I learned later, one of the ladies in my tour but not from our church was literally shoved down on the ground as these tourists behind her ran to the railing shouting "Papa, Papa!" as there went down one mama. She was literally trampled on the ground as people stepped on and over her. And I wasn't there to protect her! Fortunately, a man near her intervened and got her up and she was fine.

Then Il Papa got closer. With my 350 millimeter lens I could see him in the distance, waving his hand. This is unreal. It's Pope Francis! I wanted to invite him to Hawaii.

Maybe I should shout, "ALOHA!" In this picture you see on the screen, it looks like he is saying, "Where is that Dan Chun? I heard he was here!" In my dreams.

As he turned the corner he was now heading right for me. In that moment, I had to make the choice, would I just take pictures of him and worry about focusing, lighting, and composition, or would I just experience him and put down my camera.

So I chose to do just that. I put down the camera. And the benefit was that when he came as close as maybe 15 feet from me, he turned my way and smiled. And I must say, the smile of Pope Francis was the most loving smile I had ever experienced. I truly felt that love just radiate out of him, drenching us all there. I was overwhelmed by his smile and seeming godly love.

I was wondering if that what it was like when Jesus walked into a crowd and people got healed just by touching his cloak.

And then as the Pope passed, I quickly put the camera up to my eye and snapped a shot and got this photo. (Picture of the Pope's back was shown.) And that is why I have a close up of Pope Francis' back. It was because I chose to experience him first. So if you ever want a close up of Pope Francis' back, come see me.

By God's grace, Pam, who was still with the tour group, ran to a railing and took this video of the Pope going by. It was so close and good it looked like CNN. Here it is and you might even see at the end our own head of Ira Johnson. (Video shown.) Better yet, here is Ira Johnson's best shot of the Pope as he went by our church group.

So what is the metaphorical lesson in all of this? First of all, when we feel blocked by certain challenges, it might turn out better than we think. And if we want to experience joy in the midst of hurdles and blocks in our lives,

then we need to relaxed, trust, and experience God for He can bring good out of bad. I was prevented in going where I wanted to. But then it turned out better because out of maybe 50,000 people, I had one of the best seats.

In fact, because I couldn't return to where my tour was sitting in like the 200th row, I ended up being shuttled into the center section in like the 30th row, dead center in front of the Pope. Sorry, tour group. I tried to sit back with you all in the 200th row but they wouldn't let me.

When we are going through trials, we have to make a choice to experience God, not just take pictures of Him from afar. It's not a time to be distant from Him, but to really bask in his presence and receive His smile and love, to be close to Him.

Now some of you may be thinking, "Dan this is a nice metaphor, but what I am going through is really a lot deeper and harder and tougher than you being blocked from coming back from a bathroom and can't get back to your seat."

I get that. As your pastor I know that the pain level of this church is high. There are people here suffering from disease, illness, injury, loss of a loved one, a divorce or a gut-wrenching separation, a tension or estrangement with a friend or child or a colleague.

There are financial issues that seem insurmountable. There is a loneliness that seems to have no end. There is weariness in being a caregiver for someone. Yet, you are here. Because deep down inside you sense there has to be more to a trial than just pain.

There has to be a way more than just to cope.

And yet our verse says:
"Whenever you face trials of ANY KIND, count it nothing but joy."
James 1:2

Did you hear that? Any kind... all kind pain. ALL the kinds I listed plus more. How do we grab hold of this joy when we are feeling so low...when we are in the trough of life? If joy means we can have an optimism, and peace and strength from God in life even in the midst of suffering...then how do we attain it?

Well, I don't think we attain it like opening a soda can and drinking it. Rather, I think it has something to do with making the gut decision not to give up, but hang in there to give God a chance to build us up and show us the blessing that could come. I'll talk more about this next Sunday. It will mean prayer and talking to God a lot.

But for now if we can endure for a bit longer, there is a greater chance for God to move and for us to experience His peace, strength and optimism—hence His joy.

Verses 3 and 4 it say this:
"Because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." James 1:3-4

Friends, isn't this what we all want? An endurance to withstand the pain or the mystery of life or the loneliness in order to give God a chance to strengthen us, to show us a better way...to show us that we can be so strong and confident and mature and complete that we now lack nothing.

The verse says, “Let endurance have its full effect.” You’ll know when endurance has had its full effect when we become strong enough to help others in their pain. How does this strength come? Partially because Jesus Himself prays for us.

What is Jesus saying to us in our prayers? Sometimes He is just saying that you are a good person. That your suffering is not because you are bad. Truly sometimes our suffering is self-inflicted if we do something immoral or we drink or eat too much of something. But sometimes He just wants to say He loves us.

I have told you that when Pam and I visit other churches and they offer prayer we always go forward. Once we went up and these people we don’t know prayed for us, and I was going through a stressful time a time that I didn’t feel I was doing very well, and the person who was praying for me who didn’t know me prayed kind of a prophetic statement and said, “I think God just wants you to know that He is so pleased and proud of you.” And my heart melted. We don’t always think that God is proud of us. But here was this word, I think God just wants you to know that He is proud of you; so relax, and receive His love.

I thought, “I have to come up more often for prayer!” So don’t miss out today because people are here every Sunday to pray for you.

Know that God is proud of you...especially if you are trying to hang in there during a trial. He appreciates you. But sometimes it’s hard to hear that because we have filters perhaps from how we were raised.

But here is the biblical reference that Jesus prays for you

that you might have endurance and joy in life. Jesus is talking to Simon who will later be called Peter the Apostle.

And Jesus says: “*Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift ALL OF YOU like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*” Luke 22:31-32

What kind of endurance are we talking about? That someday after we have been sifted by Satan himself, where much bad comes from, we can be so strong that we can strengthen others.

My mom used to use an old sifter, which was a can with a crank on the side. You would put in flour or something and by twisting the handle it would turn these metal bars inside, and it would sift or push the flour through these metal grids making it finer.

Many of us are sifted because of let’s say a divorce, that is the wire in a sieve that cuts us up or the death of a loved one or a strained relationship or money problems. Those are the grids.

But Jesus is saying that you may not see it now, but there will be a joy coming up in you some day that you will be strong enough to strengthen others. Perhaps the divorced will lead Divorce Care; or those who are suffering from cancer will one day help lead Facing Cancer with Hope; or those who have lost a loved one will help in Grief Share; or maybe you may have had a tough adolescence but now you’re a youth leader.

Jesus’ prayer is that someday you will be strong enough to

strengthen others even though you are being sifted right now. Jesus Himself is praying for that. Let me say something more about endurance and maturity.

This is a hard lesson especially for us American Christians: pain is part of life. And it is only through pain that will we be driven to God to trust Him. And it is only through pain that we really grow and can be strong and confident and mature.

We live in a culture where we try to avoid pain. Or worse yet, we think if we truly are followers of Jesus or just in life in general that there should not be any unfair pain whatsoever. We think that good people should never experience suffering. That is why we like books that explain, “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” It is because we are perplexed. Good people, godly people, shouldn’t suffer we think.

The reality is that all people suffer. All people have pain. Whether you are a Christian or not. Whether you are a nice guy or not. All will suffer unfair pain. And if you go to any church that teaches you otherwise, they are giving you a false bill of goods.

The gospel doesn’t make you avoid pain, it helps you deal with the pain and disappointment. And sometimes following Jesus puts you in pain as it did for the Christians to whom James was writing. Pain is part of life even if you are good and moral and obedient to God.

Jesus is sent by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where He is tempted by Satan. Joshua had to fight 35 Kings in the Promised Land—not just any land but the land promised by God to Joshua and his people.

Joseph in the Old Testament was thrown into prison, but because he was there in Egypt he saved his family from a famine. The King had one more move.

So if pain is part of life and it is unavoidable, how can I consider it joy when I go through a trial?

I was talking to my friend Alan yesterday and he said that part of the joy that comes from trials is that we learn more of the personality and character of God. We experience Him more. We see more of Him. We put down our cameras so to speak and experience more facets of Him. We experience His forgiveness, mercy, grace, wisdom, and healing. That's good.

In the Bible we see how God's character is unveiled to us when people have trials. We learn that God is kind to us even when we feel like a leper. We learn that He is forgiving as a father to a prodigal son—so forgiving, that He is willing to run down a road to give a robe and a ring to a wayward, disobedient son.

We learn that God is with us to protect us from the stones that will be thrown at us for our mistakes and He says, "Does anyone condemn you? Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

We learn He is a God who says in the Bible: *"Do not fear for I am with you. Do not be afraid for I am YOUR God. I will help you and strengthen you and lift you up with my victorious right hand."* Is. 41:10

Here is where the joy of optimism comes that is full of strength and peace. It is the deep peace and joy that you are not alone in this. It is the peace and

joy in knowing that there is someone above who is watching out for you...not to avoid pain or remove your burden but to strengthen your back for the burden. Jesus Himself is praying for you.

Again, from the days of slavery and beyond it was the church and the good news of the gospel of the African American churches that sustained and strengthened the African Americans even to this day.

And why have a faith in following Jesus Christ, who was not only fully human but fully God? Because He knew pain. He knew trials. He knew injustice. He knew betrayal. He knew sacrifice. He knew the loss of a friend due to illness. He knew what it meant to be unappreciated and hated. He knew crucifixion. He walked this earth and experienced the same pain we did and are experiencing.

This is the God who understands our pain. He is for us, so why not choose to follow Him?

The key to having joy in the midst of pain is this: Can we finally stop trusting our own intellect and physical strength and street smarts and realize we need to trust God? For when we trust God, we have a chance for joy. When we can put all of our trials into His hands. All of our bags of worries at his feet at His throne...and choose not to pick them up when we leave His throne room...then we have an opportunity for joy.

I close with this verse. It's a verse that only makes sense, now that we understand what it takes to trust Jesus in the midst of our trials. It's worth memorizing, and we once did as a congregation. Here it is: *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called*

according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

Did you see those two words – ALL THINGS? Say with me: "all things." Say it again: "all things." Say it again: "all things."

Yes, All Things. Not some, not most, not a few, not a couple, not a bunch, not just one, not just small ones, not just big ones—but ALL THINGS work together for good for those who love God.

May we get to a point where we can love God enough to trust Him in ALL THINGS? Then we will know joy.

Now I am going to ask you to do something. I am going to lead us in a prayer. And with eyes closed I want you to stretch out your hands as if to say, "Lord, I give You all things in my life...all my trials...all my disappointments, my pain and I give them all to You."

And then as I pray, I am going to ask you to keep your hands stretched out and then put your hands down...to show that you have given ALL THINGS over to God. They are in HIS hands and now we will trust Him that ALL THINGS will work together for good for those who love God.

And I believe He is calling you all to His purpose but at some point, and maybe today, you will accept that purpose and choose to follow Him. It can start today if you just stretch out your hands to say, "Lord, I am going to trust You with my life and with all things."

Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: fpchkoolau@gmail.com