
The Center That Holds

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Thanksgiving Day, 2025**

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."
Phil. 4:4 NRSV

Have you ever watched a wheel turn—on a car, a bike, a wagon, or even the wheel of fortune?

Out at the edge, everything is moving fast.
The rim hits every bump.
It wobbles.
It gets all the pressure and all the speed.

It's tempting to live our lives there — out on the rim.
There's something about being busy and stretched that makes us feel more alive.
There's something about constantly managing expectations that makes us feel more in control.

It's not so surprising, then, that we feel a little bit apprehensive when Paul shows up on Thanksgiving Day and says,
"Rejoice in the Lord always."

Our first reaction can be one of resignation at best and exhaustion at worst.

Something like:
"I finally got a day off, and now I have something else that I'm supposed to do!"
But stay with me!

Paul isn't telling us to *perform* joy.

He isn't asking us to make more exciting Facebook posts, produce more sun-drenched Instagram photos, or pick up the pace of our TikTok moments.

It's not about telling the world that something amazing just happened.

Paul is asking for something much quieter, more resilient, and more honest.

He is asking us to practice joy as a posture of trust, not a performance of emotion.

Paul is writing from prison.

He's not in a place where he can make something amazing happen.

It's not a particularly happy place.

But it is a place where Paul can find his true self, what I'm calling the center of the wheel.

The center of the wheel is the source of joy ... not only for Paul, but for all of us.

Paul gets to the essence of what he is trying to describe when he says:

"The Lord is near."

That's the center.
God's presence.
God's action.
God at the heart of our lives—not out on the rim, yelling instructions at us—but right in the middle, steady and faithful.

And here's the crucial thing:
the center isn't quiet because nothing is happening.
It's quiet because God is there.
And God is at work.

We sometimes imagine God as one more voice adding pressure:
Be better. Do more. Fix yourself.

But Paul imagines God differently.
God is the One who steps into the center
and holds us
even while everything else keeps spinning.

So when Paul says, "Do not worry,"
he isn't telling us our worries are silly.
He's inviting us to bring those worries
away from the rim—
where they run wild—
and toward the center,
where God is already acting.

And that matters.

Because out on the rim, we feel responsible for everything.
We feel like we must build and maintain our identities on our own.

But at the center?
At the center, God takes responsibility for us.
God holds our identity.
God speaks our name.
God frees us from the need to manufacture our worth.

At the rim, we're constantly behind.
At the center, time slows
because grace isn't in a hurry.

And this is why Paul talks about thanksgiving.
Thanksgiving isn't just counting blessings.
It's a shift in posture.

It's recognizing:
God is acting in my life.
I'm not alone.
Everything doesn't depend on me.

Gratitude is one of the ways we move toward the center.

And as we do—even a little—Paul says something remarkable happens:
the peace of God starts guarding our hearts.

Not the peace we produce.
Not peace we talk ourselves into.
A peace that meets us.
A peace that holds us steady.
A peace that doesn't erase chaos
but keeps chaos from owning us.

And when we start living from the center,
our vision changes.

At the rim, everything feels sharp, urgent, threatening.
Everything is a judgment on whether we're enough.

But from the center—
from God's living, acting presence—
we start to see differently.
We notice truth.
We notice goodness.
We notice one another again.

Because we're not living out of fear.
We're living out of grace.

And that's where joy comes from.
Not from pushing harder.
Not from achieving more.
But from being met by a God
who is already at work
at the center of our lives.

So what does that mean for Thanksgiving?

It means Thanksgiving is not just a feeling.
It's a way of moving inward.
It's a way of saying:
God is in the center,
and God is acting.

So today,
as you gather around your table,
you could take one thing from the rim—
one worry,
one burden,
one relationship,
one fear—
and imagine what it would be like
to bring it to the center.

Not to fix it.
Not to fix yourself.
But to let God hold it
with you.

That movement—
even a small one—
is the beginning of joy.

So hear Paul's words again,
not as a demand,
but as a promise:

"Rejoice in the Lord always...
The Lord is near."

The center holds.
God is there.
And God is acting.

Amen.

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