

Rejoice in the Cubs Always¹
Philippians 4:1-9
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St. John United Methodist Church
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In a *New Yorker* cartoon, a man and a woman are seated at a restaurant. The man says, "Okay, Cynthia. I'll tell you my hopes and dreams, my joys and my passions. But be forewarned — they all concern a particular sports team."

In two days there is a centennial anniversary many would like to forget. On October 14, 1908, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series by defeating the Detroit Tigers. The score was 2-0 in the fifth and final game of the series. This was their second World Championship win in a row. It was also their last.

For 100 years, the Cubs have been in a World Series drought. Our country has changed radically over the past century, but the failure of the Cubbies to win a championship has been a depressing constant in American life. When they last won, Henry Ford was producing his first Model T. Orville Wright was demonstrating his flying machine to the U.S. Army. The First World War was still years away. Being "online" meant hanging your clothes out to dry.

The Cubs have suffered the longest dry spell between championships in modern sports history. No one else in Major League Baseball, the National Football League, the National Hockey League or the National Basketball Association comes close. In fact, the other three major sports leagues were not even in *existence* when the Cubs last won the World Series. And yet, despite this long drought, Chicago fans remain faithful. They rejoice in the Cubs always.

I know of two St. John members who are faithful Cubs fans. I asked them to write their reflections after the Cubs were swept by the Dodgers last week. One talked about how the love affair began in childhood. "I can still remember 39 years ago, sitting on the floor in my house in Chicago - nine years old learning baseball listening to the Cubs on the radio. 1969, Cubs in first place at the All-Star game. My dad had taken me to a double header at Wrigley Field. I took my glove to the right field bleacher seat with my dad and sister. I brought my glove to catch a home run. Half way through the second game, I had to go to the bathroom, so we all went. I left my glove under my seat. When we came back, the man behind me showed me a home run ball and said it had hit my glove while I was gone - I felt taunted. Little did I know that for the next 39 years I would feel taunted when any team but the Cubs got the home run ball."

Another St. John member writes about her parents and grandparents being Cubbies. "I was so hoping that my parents who are 86 and 87 years old would actually get to see them in the world series. The day before the playoffs started I started looking into how much it was going to cost to get home to Chicago on an airline ticket purchased in less than two weeks notice and how much 3 tickets at Wrigley would cost, seats where my parents could easily get to and where we could see the action, as the master card commercial says the experience would have been priceless. I had already told (my boss) that I was going to break the rules for leaving town with short notice

¹ Sermon theme from www.homiletics.com

because it was a family emergency. All understood. Some folks want to know if I am going to switch teams, but one can just not do that. A Cubs fan, it is in your soul (maybe I should not say that to a preacher), it is in your blood. You have to agonize every year and just think, spring training starts in 145 days.”

This is the same kind of persistent faithfulness that Paul is calling the Christians of Philippi to show when he writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:4). Notice that Paul says nothing about winning and losing, nothing about being champions of the faith. Instead, his focus is on rejoicing in the closeness of Jesus Christ, and on practicing the quality of gentleness — which includes generosity toward others.

Paul goes on to say, “Do not worry about anything” — especially your failure to be World Champions! But “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (vv. 6-7). We Christians are to make our requests known to God, but to realize that God will not always give us what we want. Instead, God will give us what we need — give us what Paul calls “the peace of God,” a sense of well-being that comes from the Lord and links our hearts and minds to Jesus.

That’s a great gift, even when your team is losing and you are waiting for a hundred-year drought to end. It’s a great gift when you are struggling in school, or feeling miserable at work, or failing at marriage, or dealing with deep anxiety and depression. The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. That’s a promise, one that even the most despondent of Cubs fans can claim: The promise of peace.

The challenge for us is to place our focus on the peace of God, rather than on wins and losses. Too often we look at the church as though it were a baseball team — or, in this season of presidential politics, a political candidate — and we spend time and energy debating who’s going to win and who’s going to lose. We wonder: Who’s in? Who’s out? Who’s on top? It’s hard to resist this temptation, especially now — with the World Series near and an election coming up in just a few weeks.

A lot of ink has been spilled recently on changes in the religious landscape and the decline of the Christian Right. But does Jesus really care about who’s winning this religious popularity contest — the Christian Left or the Christian Right? No more than he cares about who wins the World Series — sorry, Cubbies. For Jesus, what’s important is that we rejoice in him, and let our gentleness be known to everyone. This is true whether we are liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats, Cubs fans or Yankees fans.

In fact, there always needs to be a creative tension between the Right Wing and the Left Wing of the church if Christianity is to maintain its vitality. Too often Christians focus on winners and losers in a way that reflects partisan political struggles, instead of seeing conservatives and liberals as siblings in the family of faith. Churches need conservatives who appreciate moral clarity, but also liberals who stress God’s love for the oppressed. Conversation about immigration, for example, is enriched by clarity about legal issues and charity toward undocumented workers. The Bible says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1), and it also says,

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21).

One thing we’ve lost in our highly polarized political climate is the idea that church can be a meeting ground — a community where people of diverse opinions and perspectives can gather, talk, debate and argue. Church can be an excellent place for people to wrestle with difficult issues, share perspectives and learn from one another. But if such discussions are going to be fruitful, Christians have to ground their comments in shared religious values, and make a commitment to search for the truth in a spirit of gentleness.

After the Wednesday dinner this coming Wednesday I am leading a special class for adults and youth at 6:30. It will be a respectful discussion on how we see the ethics of Jesus in both of our presidential candidates. I invite you to come with research in hand as we attempt to find common ground in the midst of our political differences.

What is needed today are “whole bird” Christians. Rick Warren, pastor of the mega Saddleback Church says, “I’m not left wing and I’m not right wing. I’m for the whole bird.” Being a whole-bird Christian means accepting that conservative Christianity rises out of the covenant made between God and Abraham, when God said, “walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). But it also requires affirming that liberal Christianity is equally biblical, and grounded in the exodus of God’s people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:7-8). Since Jesus continued this balancing act by making a new covenant and freeing people from sin and death, both conservative and liberal perspectives should be accepted as critical parts of a fully formed Christian faith.

Notice that Paul has no interest in taking sides when he gives the Philippians their game plan for Christian living. He wants them to focus on whatever is true and honorable and just — whether it comes from the Left Wing or the Right Wing. He wants them to celebrate whatever is pure and pleasing and commendable — whether it wins contests or not. He wants them to rejoice in whatever is excellent and worthy of praise — just like Cubs fans, who have rejoiced in their players through a century of broken dreams. He wants them to “stand firm in the Lord” (v. 1) — not in a particular political party.

Our challenge today is to find joy in being a fan of Jesus, and to discover peace in the living of a Christ-like life. World Championships, presidential elections and other worldly prizes have no real significance for the Savior who emptied himself, humbled himself “and become obedient to the point of death on a cross” (2:8). Any true victory is going to come from God, who raised Jesus from the dead and highly exalted him. Any lasting achievement is going to come from imitating the Christians who have gone before us, living in ways that are true, honorable, just, pure, excellent and worthy of praise. As Paul says to the Philippians, and to us, “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (4:9).

The God of peace will be with us, whether we win, lose or have to wait another hundred years for a World Championship.