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A WORK OF ART Philippians 4:4

Art is a bit of a sore subject for me. That's because it is yet one more item on the impressively long list of things at which I am completely inept. Occasionally in our family we play a game called "Telephone Pictionary" that involves drawing. My pictures inevitably evoke great laughter, ridicule and "what is that supposed to be?" comments. But I want you to think for a moment about an artistic endeavor. Imagine that you want to try your hand at painting. In my case, of course, that is a chilling thought, but never mind. Your painting will start with a vision, some mental image of how it will look, then you take the dive and begin putting brush to canvas. As you proceed you grow increasingly frustrated because somehow what you saw in your mind is not what is appearing on the canvas. Maybe your frustration grows until you realize that you have completely messed this thing up. It's not anything like what you wanted to paint and now you can't fix it.

But then comes your deliverance. You realize that you have another canvas. You still have the desire to create the thing of beauty you see in your mind, and now you have another chance. The old canvas is finished and you can discard it. You have a chance to start all over again.

That little vignette is akin to this day, New Year's Day, 2017. Perhaps 2016 was a masterpiece for you and you hate to let go of it. Or perhaps it was like the attempt at painting I just described. Maybe you had in your mind how your year was going to go, but as it went on you grew increasingly frustrated because it just wasn't turning out the way you intended. Either way, that canvas is finished. 2016 is over and will never be seen again. Before you stands the blank canvas of 2017 without even a speck of paint on it. You have a fresh start, a whole new opportunity to create a work of art. Really every single day is a new blank canvas to work with, but the beginning of a year presents us with a special opportunity to step back, see the bigger picture and chart a new course. I was thinking about mistakes I made recently. It helps me to remember today that they are done, they cannot be undone, but they are in the past. I can learn from them, then leave them in the only place they exist, which is in the past. No dwelling on them, beating myself up, rather time to look ahead, not back.

Much is going to happen this year that is out of your control. But you do have control over the choices you make and the way that you respond to the things that

will happen in your life this year, whether you deem them to be positive or negative. That is why this time of year is associated with resolutions. As we look at the blank canvas of a whole new year we think about things we'd like to change. So what are we going to do with this shiny new year before it is tarnished and tattered? What can we do to make 2017 be a work of art? Look at Philippians 4:4.

PREMISE: WE SHOULD RESOLVE TO REJOICE EVERY DAY OF 2017

There are a lot of things we can make resolutions about. We might resolve to be more diligent about exercising, or to eat a better diet, or to lose weight, or to read the Bible every day, or to read more books, or to be nicer to people or to learn a new language. There are countless possibilities when it comes to things we might resolve to attempt, accomplish or change in this new year.

This verse challenges us to resolve to rejoice always. This is a command, which means we have a choice about rejoicing. That is critical to see. Whether we live rejoicing is up to us. We can choose to do it or not, otherwise this command is pointless. This doesn't come naturally to us. In fact it is often hard and definitely counterintuitive. So why do it? The most important reason is that God commands it. But the second reason is that rejoicing makes for a better life for us. Don't you think if we actually obeyed this verse we would create a work of art in 2017? I do. Not only would we have a better attitude about everything but it will help other people as well. Imagine the effect this would have on the people around us.

Our attitudes can be more contagious than the viruses we sometimes catch. Our niece, Addison, got a cold a few weeks ago. Before it ran its course her brother, mother, grandmother, grandfather and great grandmother, everyone she lives with, got the cold. They've all just gotten over it. I heard she just got another one this week. Laurie and I once met a woman in Maui who went there for two months every winter. She said she had observed that two days after a group of people arrive in Hawaii in the winter someone gets a cold then they pass it around. They catch it on the plane.

Our moods and emotions are as contagious as viruses. I've known people, and you surely have as well, that after you've been with them you invariably feel negative and discouraged. They always have a discouraging word to share, their pessimism is always on display, and they always have something negative to share. Such a person can drain the life from us.

Years ago one day Laurie and I went out to lunch with my mother. We went to a sandwich shop that had some tables outside on the sidewalk. We ordered our food

then sat at one of those tables. As we were sitting down I noticed that there was a very attractive young couple at the next table. It was a beautiful, sunny day and I thought it was nice this young couple was enjoying a meal and the lovely day together. It turned out that it wasn't that nice. Quickly it became apparent that they were not happy. Even at our table several feet away I could feel the tension and the unhappiness. They were having an argument and it wasn't going well. It didn't ruin my day, but it did make me start to feel a bit unsettled, tense and sad. I didn't even know those people, yet I caught a bit of their emotion and it affected me.

I can remember another, much more positive, example of the power of our emotions from years ago. We were visiting our friends, Mike and Dee Riley. Mike was then the football coach at Oregon State University. Mike is not a moody guy. He is the farthest thing from the cliché of a knucklehead, screaming, hard guy football coach. He is a remarkably positive and cheerful man, and that's true of him in nearly every circumstance. He is an up, affirming person to just about everyone. He is not a "rah rah" kind of coach. This particular incident occurred when we were at a game that was a crucial one. Toby was with us, and he and I were on the sidelines. The game was intense and it wasn't going well for Oregon State, although it was still close. The other team took some cheap shots, the refs made some bad calls and the team made some mistakes. Toby and I followed the team off the field at half time and ended up walking with Mike. It was obvious that there was a lot of frustration among the players. The team went into the locker room. Toby and I were going to go up to the Riley's box where we could get some food, but we walked past the entrance to the locker room just after Mike entered. I heard him shout, "Let's go get those guys!" That was unusual for him. But as soon as he said it I could hear the team just explode in cheering. They caught Mike's enthusiasm and determination, and they went out and played a terrific second half, winning the game. Mike could have been upset, he could have chewed the team out for mistakes they made. But instead he was fired up, and the team caught it from him.

What do you want people to catch from you? Don't you want to be the kind of person who lifts people's spirits, who infects others with rejoicing? The religious leaders of Jesus' day were appalled by the people he kept company with. In Matthew 9:11 the Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" He did that a lot. The most disreputable people of their society loved being around Jesus. Why did they like him? Was it because he was pessimistic, critical, judgmental and discouraging? I don't think so. He cared about them. And he was full of joy and life. They loved having Jesus at their parties, a fact that horrified and offended the most religious people. Another group

that flocked to Jesus to the point where it was sometimes a problem was children. Do you think kids are typically drawn to somber, rigid, mostly judgmental people? No, they like to be around people who are full of life and rejoicing, who lift their moods. You should see how kids light up around Laurie because of the joy in her. That's what Jesus was like. And that's what he wants us to be like.

For us to rejoice we must have something to rejoice about. If we are to rejoice always, we will have to have something to always be happy about. We have just reviewed the gifts that God has given to us through Jesus. They were joy, peace, life and light. That is a lot to be happy about. If you lacked any of them you would not feel like rejoicing at all. But when you have those you have something better than anything the world can give you, and you have reason to rejoice no matter what may occur. This is why Paul commands us to rejoice. It is because we have reason to in Jesus Christ.

We aren't always going to feel like rejoicing. Paul doesn't say "rejoice whenever you feel good and things are going your way." He says rejoice **always**, regardless of how you feel. Even on bad days we have something to be happy about. We have the peace, the life, the hope, the light of Jesus. How can we rejoice always, even in hard times? I have some practical suggestions that can help us create a year of rejoicing.

HOW CAN WE DO THAT?

Be Grateful For Blessings

I remind you, in Christ you always have reasons to rejoice.. You have been forgiven of all your sin forever. You have been adopted by God as his child. He loves you infinitely, unconditionally and eternally. You have the gift of eternal life. You have his Spirit in you. You have his peace and his life in you. You have his Word to guide you. You have brothers and sisters in Christ to support you. You have his light, the knowledge of what life is all about and who you are. You have God's presence with you continually.

If you have a financial setback this year you still have all those blessings. If your health fails in some way you still have all those blessings. If your career goes into the tank, you still have those priceless blessings. No matter what happens, you have those blessings. They are cause both for gratitude and rejoicing. Rejoice in those blessings and give thanks to God for them.

Give thanks for the myriad other blessings God gives you. In October I had surgery on my arm. A doctor cut my arm open, cleaned up a lot of badly damaged tissue,

sewed together a mangled tendon and screwed it back into the bone. After the surgery my arm hurt. A lot. Any movement of it caused bolts of pain. My arm was useless. Today it doesn't hurt anymore. In fact, there has been significant improvement in the problem that led to the surgery. What if there were no surgeons to do that kind of work? Honestly, if someone said to me, "Here's a super sharp knife. Use it to cut that guy's arm open and fix the stuff in there," I would say, "no way on God's green earth. I'm not doing that." So first I am thankful for the blessing of a doctor who was both willing and able to fix the problem. But second, I am thankful to God that our bodies heal. My car doesn't do that. Some churl swung his door open in a parking lot and dinged the door of our car more than a year ago. That ding is still there. It didn't heal. What a blessing that an arm that has been cut open and hurts terribly, gets better!

The more we give thanks for the countless amazing gifts God showers daily upon us, the more we will be able to rejoice always. And the more we rejoice, the more we will create a work of art in 2017.

Live One Day At A Time

In Matthew 6:25 Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life." Later in verse 34 he said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own." Paul picked up on that theme in Philippians 4:6 when he said, "Do not be anxious about anything."

Jesus was realistic about what life is like. He was not telling us to have a sort of Pollyanna view of life that everything will always be fine. You've seen those bumper stickers that say, "Life is hard and then you die." Jesus wasn't quite that pessimistic, but he did agree that life is hard. He said, "Each day has enough troubles of its own." What does that verse suggest your day will be like? I would anticipate that things would not likely go smoothly, that when I wake up in the morning I should expect there will be trouble today, because each day has its own share of troubles, and they will be all we need for one day.

You have surely had one of those days where everything goes wrong. On a day like that can you ever see yourself saying, "well at least it can't get any worse"? No way. It also always get worse. Each day has enough trouble for one day. We should expect that there will be trouble today. A day without trouble is the exception, not the rule.

To help us with our troubles Jesus said just deal today with the challenges today presents. Don't get tied up in knots over what might happen tomorrow. We all

know that when we are worried and anxious we are neither at peace nor rejoicing. Rejoicing and worry are pretty much exclusive of one another. You can worry or you can rejoice, but you can't do both at the same time. Christmas week we just took it one day at a time and everything worked out.

The things we get anxious about, thus unable to rejoice, are things that have not happened yet, but we fear they will. I have mentioned before that I have a serious case of odontophobia. That's fear of the dentist. My case is bad. Even a routine checkup and teeth cleaning is cause of great anxiety for me. I white knuckle my way through the cleaning, and when the appointment is done I come out exhausted, rejoicing that it's over and praying that Jesus will come back before I have to go through that again. The funny thing is I mostly don't experience pain. I just experience fear of pain. I spend the whole time afraid that they are going to hurt me. This is not because I am a weak kneed wimp, it is a result of childhood trauma. I believe it is a dental form of post traumatic stress. Call it DPTS, dental post traumatic stress. But my point here is that I am anxious about something that doesn't actually happen.

I still don't have a solution for my odontophobia, but it is obvious that what stops us from rejoicing much of the time is our focus on something that looms in the future. We are worried about some terrible thing that might happen to us, or some future task that is weighing on us because we fear we might fail, or because we don't know if we are going to have enough money to live on at some future date. All of these things are not real, they are things that exist in our imagination, things that may never happen.

Way back in 1991 the Gulf War, Desert Storm, was fought after Saddam Hussein had his army invade Kuwait. This resulted in great concern in Israel that Hussein would use chemical or biological weapons against them as a way of derailing the campaign against him. The government of Israel issued gas masks and atropine syringes that counteract chemical agents to citizens. They encouraged people to create a sealed room in their homes to protect against such attacks. Iraq did begin launching Scud missiles against Israel. Many Israelis died as a result of the attacks. But after the war scientists examined the deaths and found that very few people were actually killed by the missile attacks. The great majority of deaths were due to heart attacks triggered by fear of chemical or biological missile attacks, even though none actually ever happened.

I have lived long enough to know that the majority of things I have been anxious about in my life never happened, though not all. Some things I feared might

happen did occur, and they were hard or painful, but somehow God got me through them. My worrying about them didn't help even a little. It didn't keep them from happening and it didn't help me get through them. So what did worrying accomplish? Nothing, except to make me less joyful and peaceful.

Have you ever wondered why God seems to make a thing about not worrying? I get why God said we shouldn't be unkind, lie, steal, hold grudges, lust, commit adultery and so on. But why did Jesus make a major point in the Sermon on the Mount about not worrying?

God isn't harmed if we worry. It doesn't damage him. Nor does it injure anyone else. So why does he command this repeatedly? One reason is that worry distorts our priorities and can actually cause us to hurt other people, for sure. But I think the biggest reason is that he wants us to experience fullness of life. He wants us to rejoice. And worrying seriously degrades our lives. It completely blocks rejoicing in our lives. In other words, God commands us not to worry because he cares about us. He cares that we experience life to the fullest, and if we are to do that we must not worry.

So live today focused on what you have to do today. It's fine to plan and prepare for the future as much as you can, but leave the future in the future and focus today on today. How can we do that? That brings me to our next point.

Let God Lead

Psalm 37:3-6 says, "Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this. He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn." Then in verse 7 David wrote, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him."

What does it mean to commit your way to the Lord? When you commit something to someone you are giving that thing to them to do with as they see fit. When you commit your giving to this church, for instance, you are handing over money for the church to use. So if you commit your way to the Lord you are saying, "I'm giving you, Lord, the way ahead to do with it whatever you think best. I am leaving the future of my life in your hands."

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." That is both a command and a promise. In everything you do, submit to

God. That means living as God commands you to live, but also saying that you are submitting to whatever God chooses to do with you in the future. The promise is that as we do that God will make our paths straight. In other words, he will pave the road ahead of us and make it go to the right place.

Laurie had to cancel her appointment with her hair stylist when she made the emergency trip to Seattle. This is kind of a big deal for her because she is dependent on her stylist to keep her looking as amazing as she always looks. When she has an appointment she always has a clear picture of what she wants regarding the style and color. She never goes to her stylist and says, “Just do whatever you think best.” I can pretty much do that when I get my hair cut since it won’t matter much. Whatever they do it’s not going to look very good. But with Laurie it is a big deal and she has definite instructions for her stylist.

The question is, how do we approach God in regard to all the things that we tend to be anxious about? Do we go to him the way Laurie goes to her stylist, with very definite ideas about how this should turn out and very specific instructions about what to do? Or do we say, “Just do whatever you think best”? Obviously our tendency is to treat God a lot like Laurie’s hair stylist, insisting that he listen to our instructions and line up with our plan.

God tells us to not be anxious but to make our requests to him. It is fine to tell him what you hope and ask for, but our prayer, and even more our attitude toward all of it, should be “Do whatever you think is best.” That’s what it means to commit our way to the Lord. The very act of praying about something in life is an admission that God has control over things that we do not have. If he didn’t have that control, then praying would be pointless.

Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” Some translations have “determines” or “directs” their steps. That’s the point. God is wise, all-knowing and sovereign. He is like the best hair stylist in the universe and whatever he does with your hair may be different than you had in mind, but it will end up being immeasurably better.

What a relief it is to relinquish control of all of the universe, control that we try to exert and end up with frustration because we actually control almost nothing. It is our efforts to control everything that produce enormous stress and frustration in life. If you think you control something and try to control it when you actually have zero control it is going to produce a huge amount of stress and frustration. But what a joy it is to know that there is someone who does have control, someone

you can completely trust. So you can let go and relax. The irony is that it is in letting God direct our steps and not trying to take his place that we actually have the possibility of being at peace and rejoicing every day.

Do God's Will Today

In John 4 Jesus had a very unconventional, down right scandalous, conversation with a Samaritan woman. It was scandalous because she was a hated Samaritan, because men didn't talk to unaccompanied women they didn't know, and because this woman was notorious for her lifestyle. But the result of that conversation was that she believed in him. That all happened while the disciples had gone to In-N-Out to get something to eat. When they came back with a double double for Jesus he said, "I have food that you don't know anything about." This puzzled the guys. Where did he get food? Did someone give him a gyro sandwich while they were gone? But Jesus said in verse 34, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."

Jesus said doing his father's will sustained him more than food. It was what he lived to do. He would rather do his father's will than eat. That was what his life was about. Laurie and I like to watch those shows on HGTV about people buying homes in Hawaii or the Caribbean. I have noticed often the people will look at a house that has a killer view of the ocean and when they do they say something like, "That's what I'm talking about. This is what it's all about." That's what Jesus thought when it came to doing his father's will. This is what it's all about!

The thing that's exciting about this is that if we follow him and make that what our lives are all about, nothing can stop us. There are a lot of things that we can set out to do that will be blocked in one way or another. But no one can ever stop us from doing the Father's will in any and every situation.

Imagine that at some point during this year you are having a tough day. It could be tomorrow. On that tough day ask yourself, "Can I do the Father's will today?" The answer is yes. If doing the Father's will is what you want most in life, if it is more important to you than eating, then you'll be good. You can do what you want to do most in life. Rather than focusing on the things you can't do or the things that aren't going your way, focus on what you really want. You want to do the Father's will. So you do that and rejoice.

Back in my hockey playing days I had the opportunity to apply a similar principle. I had a few holes in my hockey game. I was slow, I had a terrible shot, and I wasn't real good at handling the puck. Which is to say I was terrible. I played

defense, because I could mostly get in the way of opposing players. So I almost never scored goals, not just because I was playing defense but because of my utter lack of offensive skills. The kind of goals I scored were usually flukes like the one I scored when I picked up the puck behind the other team's net, saw a teammate skating toward the goal and tried to pass it to him. The puck hit the skate of an opposing player and ricocheted past their goalie into the net. I scored from behind the net! Anyway, I remember one time a teammate made a terrific pass to me through traffic across the rink. Because the goalie had been on the other side of the net fearing my teammate might shoot I had an open net to shoot at. I almost whiffed on the shot. I did get it off but it was a weak, wobbly shot that went well wide of the net. Man I was upset at myself. That was a sure goal and I botched it. So I gave up. I quit. What was the use? No, I didn't quit. I was disappointed and frustrated with myself. But I didn't play hockey just to score goals. If I did I would have quit. I played hockey to enjoy the game, to get some exercise, and to be with friends on the team. That was what hockey playing was all about. And I could do that even if I never scored another goal.

We may be disappointed or frustrated or even grieved by things that happen in our lives. But in those times if our lives are about doing the will of the Father we can still do that, so we can rejoice.