

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
October 4, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer
There's always reason to rejoice

—Philippians 1:18-27

Today I want to talk about a subject that is sensitive and difficult. I know that people in our congregation have been affected by this. I am not trying to say anything to specifically address those past situations, nor do I in any way want to add to anyone's grief or pain, though I sincerely hope that if you have been affected by this in the past, today you do find comfort and strength and reason to rejoice, too. The sermon is mainly meant for you if you are currently struggling with this matter, either personally or because you know someone struggling with it. I earnestly pray that with the Spirit's blessing, the message is beneficial to those who hear it.

Suicide is still relatively rare in terms of the reasons why Americans die every year. About 2.8 million Americans die a year, and about 48,000 of those deaths are by suicide. Less than two percent of all deaths. Causes like heart disease and cancer are at the top with more than half a million deaths each. But as for suicide, that is still 48,000 people, and it is the tenth leading cause of death among all ages. Also troubling is the fact that suicides among all ages have been rising slowly but steadily in the last 20 years. In recent years, more than two and a half times more people die by suicide than homicide, so way more people take their own life than have their life taken from them by someone else. That's tragic. And those numbers don't tell the whole story. Much higher of course is the number of suicide attempts, and higher still would be the number of people who seriously think about suicide.

The subject of suicide affects Christians too. Christian people struggle with thoughts of suicide. Please don't think: "A Christian would never wrestle with such a thing" or "Any person who struggles with thoughts of suicide must be giving up their Christian faith." That way of thinking is not helpful. Christian people can struggle with suicide. It is a sad and distressing part of our human condition. It seems that many times suicide is connected with mental illness, such as depression, deep anxiety, schizophrenia, and others. It seems that most of the time suicide is connected with feelings of hopelessness: the tunnel vision down the road ahead makes life look like a bleak, never-ending path into more suffering and pain, whether that suffering would be physical, emotional, or mental, or all three combined. As people age, especially well beyond retirement age, the risk factor increases. A severe chronic medical problem increases risk. Loss of job, loss of an important relationship, feeling extremely alone and isolated, certain stressful professions—all these things increase risk. Feeling like a burden to other people in life, feeling worthless about oneself—these too are dangers that create risk. So, do you think Christian people of all ages are somehow safe from all these things? Of course not. We get sick in body or mind, we experience suffering and pain (some of it severe), we lose people we love, we lose things important to us, we wrestle with feelings of isolation and with feelings of worthlessness, too. All that is now part of life on earth and part of the human condition.

Before I go further, I want to say one thing. If you ever find yourself wrestling with thoughts and feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and death, please talk about that with someone. With a family member, a close friend, a pastor. As hopeless and helpless as you may feel, the situation is not hopeless, and help is available. We pastors do not pretend to be medical or mental health experts. But we are thankful there are people who are. With spiritual assistance from your pastors, and with medical or mental health assistance from those who can provide it when need be, there is always a way forward.

In our Sunday catechism class at noon we just discussed the fall into sin. Our catechism students looked through Genesis chapter three, at how the woman and the man ate from the tree even though God had commanded them, "Do not eat of it or you will die." Enticed by the devil, our first parents ate against God's command and really caused their self-destruction. The students were then asked, "How did the man and woman feel after they became sinners?" The students looked at Genesis, and they found the answer: The first sinners felt shame and embarrassment, and they felt fear. Suddenly deep anxiety and a sense of dread about the future filled their frame and dominated their mind. And so it has been for any person born ever since. Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble (Job 14).

The apostle Paul found that to be true in his life, too. Paul had been as anti-Christian as they come, but the grace of our Lord was poured out on Paul abundantly. Through the gospel, God gave Paul faith in Christ. For Paul, everything else became a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord, and what meant more to him than anything else in life was having the righteousness that comes as a gift from God and is by faith in Christ. Paul's new mind turned to heavenly things. Along with fellow Christians, Paul eagerly awaited the Savior from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew the Savior had promised to return and with his almighty power transform these lowly bodies of ours, as they now exist in their humbled condition, so they will be like his glorious resurrected body. All this Christian faith and hope Paul carried around in a body and mind that were still of few days and full of trouble.

Even as a Christian, especially as a Christian, Paul still suffered difficulty and pain, both personal and professional. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," he once told fellow Christians. To other Christians he wrote, "It has been given to you, given as a gift for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake." So hardship and suffering are a part of every Christian's life.

When Paul wrote Philippians chapter one, he was not thinking or talking about suicide, but his words do have something to say to every Christian struggling with that, too. It was not an especially encouraging time in Paul's life. He was in chains. I mean, literally, he was in chains. He had been arrested, had lost his freedom, and was separated from society as though a criminal. Why? Because he was a Christian who confessed Christ. Do you think Paul ever felt gloomy, sitting in jail and looking back at the loss of his freedom that could have been used to be out and about serving the cause of Christ? Do you think Paul ever felt isolated? Do you think Paul ever suffered from anxiety, not knowing exactly what the future looked like, if he even had a future on earth? I mean, it was possible he might be put to death there in prison. Do you think he was ever tempted by a sense of hopelessness? What person would not feel and experience such things given the circumstances?

So he writes this little letter that is now called his epistle of joy. A marvelous little gem. He picks up the theme of joy and rejoicing. Like a master composer of music, he keeps developing that theme for the Philippians, but I think, also keeps developing it for himself. As much as reminds the Philippians there's always reason to rejoice, given the circumstances, I think he is also telling his own soul, "There's always reason to rejoice."

In our reading for today, Philippians 1:18-27, just listen to the positive words Paul writes down: *rejoice...help...deliverance...expectation...hope...courage...conviction...continue...progress...joy*. Paul's first joy? The gospel is advancing. Christ is being preached. Not in the way Paul would have chosen, but in the way God chose. We all have reason to rejoice whenever and wherever Christ is being preached. Christ's righteousness and Christ's death solves the problem of our sin, the problem that causes our condition that causes all the rest of the problems we have. The gospel message of Christ announces forgiveness. Forgiveness from God for every sin, so we can forget whatever is behind and keep reaching toward what is ahead. The gospel message of Christ announces righteousness. Not a righteousness we try to manufacture for ourselves (without success by the way). But the righteousness that comes from God and that is ours by faith in Christ. You are forgiven and you are righteous right now because of your Savior, Jesus Christ.

Another joy of Paul's? He knew he was not alone. Even though in a depressing situation, he told himself he was not alone. He knew Christians like the Philippians were praying for him. He knew the Holy Spirit, whom Paul here calls *the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, was helping him. Paul didn't know what the future held. Who does but God himself? But Paul looked at the future with expectation and hope. *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* He explains by saying, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul starts out with living. Living is Christ. *Living is Christ* means we have Jesus' words and promises in our life. Words that give us eternal life, as well as words that tell us he will protect and provide for us in this life. Promises that when we come to him, he will never drive us away, that as we cast our cares on him, he will sustain us and will never let the righteous fall. *Living is Christ* means we have a Savior we get to serve. Any day, every day, whether the sun is shining bright or the sky looks pitch black, we have a Savior we get to serve. We are children of God who get to shine like stars in a crooked and depraved world. Whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we get to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Living is Christ.

Dying is gain. Paul gives a wonderful description of death for the Christian, caused by the humble death and glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Dying as a Christian means departing and being with Christ. The soul departs and goes to be with Christ. Just like Christ told the man dying on the cross next to him, "Today you will be *with me* in paradise." There's so much we will be free from. The suffering, the difficulty, the pain, the mental and emotional stress. All of it gone. But even better, yes, best of all, is just being with Christ.

Paul acts as though he has a choice in this. "You know, wow, if I had the choice, would I rather live, would I rather die? I don't know what I'd choose. One is good. Living is Christ. The other is even better. Departing and being with Christ is gain." Of course, Paul knows the choice is not his to make. That is in the hands of our gracious God. It's not necessarily bad to want to die to go be with Christ. In fact, in a way that's good. We would rather be with Christ! But it's not good to want to self-destroy. That's unhealthy. That state of mind needs to be helped with spiritual support, and if need be, with professional help. And it's healthy to get that kind of help.

Because there is more living to do, whether God determines that to be for a short time or a long time. After starting with living and talking about dying, Paul returns to living. Living for others, not self. *It is more necessary for you that I remain in the body...I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith.* And living together for Christ. *Stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.* Whatever struggle a Christian goes through, physical, mental, or emotional, there's always hope for the soul, always something to look forward to. There's always reason to rejoice. Amen.