

“Again, I Will Say, Rejoice”

Philippians 4:1-9
Richard C. Allen
October 9, 2011

South Glastonbury
Connecticut

I want to take the church to Africa today. We couldn't all squeeze onto a South African Airlines flight to Johannesburg, so I thought I'd take us to that part of the world by sharing with you, in a rather personal way, what I have learned of faith on my many excursions to that land of the Chewas and Tombucas and Yaos, to that land that David Livingstone visited in the 1800's, that land dominated by the loveliest lake I have ever seen. I'll try not to repeat stories you've heard me tell one time too many. Because my own Christian faith has been shaped by people there, and because my own understanding of the Bible has come to life because of what I have witnessed there, I wanted to whisk you all away and take you there for fifteen minutes.

When I read those words from the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi, the one word that keeps reverberating through my bones is the word 'Rejoice.' Rejoice feels to me like a full body experience. It's a dance; it's a song; it's a silence; it's a feast; it's a jazz band concert. It's a full-body roll down the side of a grassy hill. We don't do enough rejoicing in our culture! Rejoicing is an essential part of living our faith. Sometimes, I look at a piece of art and I just know the artist was rejoicing as she applied the paint to the canvass. Sometimes, I watch two people having coffee at an outside table in the center of town, and I can just see they are rejoicing. I can't tell what it's about, but I can tell they are celebrating something! Maybe it's just the aroma of their Tanzanian Teaberry coffee that has them so alive and so grateful and so expressive.

I'd like to introduce you now to Mrs. Tonoh, the mother of the carvers whose art work is on sale today in the social hall. I had met her son, George, in 1993 while crowded into the back of a dump truck. Years later, when I had heard that George had died, I asked his younger brother to take me the two hundred miles to Katundu Village, their home village, to visit George's grave. Leaving the cemetery, we went to the home of Mrs. Tonoh.

Out she came with 'ngaka' a woven mat for sitting on the ground for a chat. A mat for the men and a mat for the women. It was there I met the village headman, Mr. Ten Cows, and all the members of Mrs. Tonoh's family. Then she returned to the mats with a tea pot that looked so old it might have been part of the Boston Tea Party. The tea was hot and strong and soothing. Then she brought out the boiled cassava. Do you know cassava? It's a root crop, slightly bitter but tender and delicious. The combination of tea and cassava on the 'ngaka' and all the chatter made me feel like I was one of the family. I had only just arrived within the hour, but it was no longer African villagers and a white guy from Connecticut; it was just...us. It was just us. I thought to myself, "So this is what the Kingdom of God is like. It's like a stranger being made to feel like part of the family.

Now, I could serve you the tea and the cassava, but the hospitality I received was beyond the food and the beverage. Before the day ended, I had told a few Ananzi stories from West Africa; they had sung some songs in their native language; we had shared a prayer. Mrs. Tonoh was my teacher that day. She took her potter's hands and shaped the clay of my faith by awakening me to the profound gift of hospitality. She lives in a mud hut with a tin roof. She walks with a cane and her eyes betray a fatigue of hard work. But there is in her a rejoicing, a gladness, a heart that wants to dance. I think of Katundu Village now as the village of Philippi that Paul visited and later wrote a letter to. Mrs. Tonoh knows the meaning of 'Rejoice' and she taught it to me!

“Again, I will say, ‘Rejoice!’” The second person I’ll introduce you to has a name but I don’t know it. I had been attending the 8:00 service at the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, a church associated with the great liberator, David Livingstone. We heard one Sunday morning that the following Sunday would be tithing Sunday, the day when everyone would bring their pledges and offerings. I recognized it as the equivalent of our Stewardship Sunday. So I went back to my room at the Mai Tsalani rest house and saw that I still had ten travelers checks. Ten percent of ten is one, so I cashed that one check and designated it as my tithe. It felt good carrying it around all week in my wallet. I showed up the following Sunday ready to surrender it into the offering plate.

We were into the first verse of the opening hymn when the front side doors opened and in came a man with a wheelbarrow loaded with sacks of maize. Wearing a huge smile on his face, he dumped this load near the communion table and disappeared out the door. Part way into the sermon, here he came again with a second load of maize. Wearing an even bigger smile, he piled the bags on top of the others. Then disappeared. Right about the time for the offering plates to be passed, he came in a third time pushing that wheelbarrow; this time kicking up his heels, almost dancing; not the kind of dancing that says, ‘look at me, look at me, aren’t I something;’ but the kind of dancing that says, “God is good, God is good.”

This man was rejoicing! He was presenting his tithe, his thank offering. I didn’t know what the church treasurer was going to do with all that maize! I just knew I was witnessing what Paul must have had in mind when he urged the Philippians to rejoice. I was witnessing one man’s joy at saying ‘thank you’ to God. I don’t know his name. I’ve been calling him, Mr. Chimonga, Mr. Maize.

He was my teacher that day. He taught me not to just bring my tithe to church as a function of bookkeeping or a paying of dues, but to bring it in such a way that somebody might look at me and say, “that man is rejoicing!”

I thought of bringing my wheelbarrow this morning just as a way of letting the world know God is good. I left it home. But I might bring it on October 23rd, our own South Church stewardship Sunday. Maybe I’ll wheel it in right through that door, filled with sacks of grain, a preacher’s tithe.

“Again, I will say, rejoice!” The third person I’ll introduce is Faison Mwawa. He was my Peace Corps student. He had been accepted at the school in Salima, though he was from the small town of Dowa. Dowa happens to be the town where William Kamkwamba is from, the author of the book, The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind. Because Faison was from Dowa and had no relatives in Salima, he announced that he needed to build a house on the school grounds. I asked him if he knew how to build a house; he being only 16 years old. He looked at me as if I were from Mars and replied, “Don’t you know how to build a house, Mr. Allen?” He couldn’t imagine how I had reached the age of 22 without such a basic knowledge for providing a roof over my head.

We went together to the forest to cut the trees we’d need; a large one for the center post, smaller ones for the support beams, even smaller ones to hold up the walls. We cut grass for the roof and mixed mud for the siding. Mostly, I watched as Faison went about these chores. He whistled while he worked. He sang a song as he chopped the trees. He stomped his feet as he bladed the long grass. Repeating what his father and his grandfather and his great grandfather had done before him, this young student rejoiced as he took charge of his life, as he went about these tasks without complaining or whining.

He seemed elated that he had learned already at age 16 some of what it means to be a man, an adult in his world.

When the house was completed with a second coat of mud, Faison invited some of us over for a meal he had cooked over a fire, setting his pot on three large stones. Before we dined on the nsima and nyama yam buzi, Faison offered a prayer. He thanked God for the school and for this new beginning and asked God to bless his home, a one-room mud hut fit for a prince.

He was my teacher that day. Our roles were reversed. He taught me something about self-reliance, about doing what you have to do, about rejoicing in the midst of the labor, and about remembering to thank God for life itself. On one of my recent sabbaticals, I tried to find Faison Mwawa, but his brother told me he had died the year before. His mud hut was long gone from the school campus. But the memory of that student rejoicing is forever etched on my heart.

I always appreciate it when anyone of you shares with me a story of how your faith has been shaped and formed. So, occasionally, I share with you how my faith took on the character that you see in me. The Apostle Paul lived two thousand miles and two thousand years from Mrs. Tonoh and Mr. Chimonga and Faison Mwawa; but they all seemed to reach the same conclusion: it is a blessed thing to rejoice in the goodness of God. This is what I wanted to share with the church this morning, in the greatest of hope. Amen.