



Community is shaped by the conversations we share.
These questions are just a tool to help you meaningfully
engage with the themes of this week's teaching.

Discussion Questions

Scriptures. Philippians 1:2–6, Acts 16:14–18, 16:19, 16:28–30

Summary. In this final conversation in this series, we talk about friendship and community, and what it looks like to see and experience joy as grace.

Sad Stories. Jeremy told a story about the recent loss of his dog and reflected on how his 4-year-old daughter's innocent question about his sadness brought him solace. Joy has a multitude of meanings and expressions, and the richness of human experience warrants a broader vocabulary to articulate it fully.

Types of Joy. We looked at the connections that Paul makes in his writings between different words used for joy, linking it to "grace" and "gift." That connection for Paul transcends mere happiness and can coexist with deeper emotions like anxiety and sorrow, while also being grounded in a relationship. Reading his letter to the Philippians (who lived in an essential Roman city), we get a glimpse of that relationship and the start of the church in Philippi from the book of Acts, ch 16.

Unexpected Friends. In Acts 16, we see how Paul is trying to start a church in Philippi. First, he looks for a synagogue, and when he can't find one, he looks for a group of 10 adult men who gather to pray and study the Jewish scriptures. When he can't find that either, he meets Lydia (a businesswoman who deals in purple dye, a highly valuable colour in society), and the church begins in her living room. Other people who get added to it are a fortune-teller (whom Paul sets free from her slaveholders by healing her) and Paul and Silas' jailor and his family. *"Unexpectedness is precisely why Paul seems to take such joy in the beauty of these friendships...because they are a surprising reflection of the power of the Jesus story to bring us together – when we least expect."*

Trust Recession. We're currently experiencing a trust recession as a society, and it is also starting to affect our interpersonal trust. And there's a risk to miss out on the unexpected friendships and their tremendous transformative potential for us. In the final analysis those kinds of friendships are pure grace, offering us new perspectives, support, and unconditional love, echoing Paul's experiences of joy with his friends in Philippi.

Connect: Name a moment of joy or delight from this past week. What was special about it that it caught your attention?

Share: Thinking about types of joy, how would you define joy in your current life circumstances, with all the complexity you're experiencing or maybe clarity? What do you think about this idea that our vocabulary for joy is not limited? And how does this connection that Paul makes between joy and grace/gift resonate with you?

How much of the joy that you have in your life comes from your relationships with others?

Another way to approach this question is to reflect on your experience when an unexpected friendship deepened your understanding of God's grace (similar to Paul's encounter with Lydia, an enslaved fortune-teller, and a jailer).

Reflect: Reflect on the concept of joy as a grace or gift from God, as Paul indicates in his letters (Philippians 1:3-6). How does this perspective change the way you view the joys in your life, even when they come in the midst of pain or loss?

Engage: Engage with the idea of a "trust recession." See the quote below. How has trust recession been true for you? How has it affected your ability and openness to form new friendships or unexpected connections with others?

In your personal experience, what actions, qualities, or circumstances help you develop a deep sense of trust with others? (And if you feel comfortable, feel free to talk about whether this group has been such a safe place for you. And if yes, gift have you found in it?)

"See right now, I think we are going through what I might call a trust recession. We are more distrustful of politicians, more distrustful of media and expertise in general than perhaps ever before, and — not all of that is unwarranted, but— I fear it has also unfortunately filtered down into our personal encounters. We don't trust each other. And look I understand that trust — deep trust — is earned. Just like it was here in Philippi, Paul opened up his heart in his letter, precisely because the safety to do that had been demonstrated time and time before in relationship.

But what I worry about is when we lose the ability to trust each other enough to try, because when that happens I don't end up with Lydia's in my life. And I don't end up with former fortune tellers who now tell me the truth. I don't give something of myself up to see if the person that I thought was my jailer might actually become my friend. And I'm not asking you to subject yourself to someone who has demonstrated that they do not deserve your trust, it's a different thing. What I'm saying is that there is a profound joy in uncovering friendships that come from unexpected places, that offer you new perspectives to learn from. Friendships that are, in the final analysis, only grace, because nothing else about them makes sense."

Take away: What is one thing you want to take away from this series to keep thinking about or maybe to put into practice? A thought or reflection on joy, an encouragement, or a challenge?

Prayer from the sermon:

Our joyful God, who is with us even now,
Closer than our breath,
Nearer than we can possibly imagine,
In those moments where we feel like you have ascended—
And we have been left behind,
Where the distance between us feels real—and far,
We ask that you would remind us of Spirit,
Your constant presence, and care, and comfort,
Your friendship that provides a basis for joy
far deeper than the moment we find ourselves in.
Might that joy begin to flow, and then pool,
And then fill some hidden reservoir deep in our soul
that we can learn to draw from when we need it most.
And then might we return with great joy
From surprising moments, and dark valleys,
And creative encounters,
From all the times where, for a second, we thought the story was over.
May joy always begin again,
In the strong name of the risen Christ we pray
Amen