

Sermon September 13, 2026

Welcome to the Community

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, 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.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about^[c] these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Rejoice in the Welcome

From a dark prison cell, unsure if he would ever see the light of day again, Paul wrote to a small community of faithful believers... a community not unlike ours... and proclaimed: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice!" And why should we rejoice in troubled times? Because the Lord is near

Beloved, today is our Rejoice in the Welcome Sunday. This is the deep, liberating welcome of God—the welcome that parts seas, breaks chains, and makes room where there was no room before.

And so we gather here to rejoice! We gather in the shadow of 9/11 remembrances when we are reminded that the world is not and faith is not always easy. gentle.

Yet we rejoice! We rejoice because God is Good and we are God's Beloved children. We Rejoice because God's welcome is already breaking in. Rejoice because the Lord is near. Rejoice because anxiety does not get the final

word. Rejoice because peace... God's peace... is guarding your hearts and minds like that pillar of cloud guarded the Israelites.

Paul does not ask us to pretend that everything is ok. He is reminding us to notice the welcome of God that is already surrounding them. To trust that liberation is not only a story from the past but a promise unfolding in the present.

Rejoice in that welcome!

We see God's presence in the most unexpected places. Just look at the ancient Israelites. They are trapped. Water before them and Pharaoh's army behind them. There is not way out and no one to offer a welcome. And then something astonishing happens. The people witness signs of God's presence. The **angel of God** and the **pillar of cloud** move from in front of the people to behind them. God shifts position.

God stands between the vulnerable and the violent. God becomes a shield. Before the waters ever part, before the miracle becomes visible, God's welcome arrives as protection.

The sea opens. The people walk through. And the waters close behind them, not as vengeance, but as the final act of liberation.

This is the welcome of God: a welcome that refuses to leave anyone in the hands of death. It is the welcome that saves lives. The welcome that disrupts empires. The welcome that insists: You are worth delivering. You are worth protecting. You are worth freeing.

If God's welcome is liberation, if God's welcome is protection, if God's welcome is joy in the midst of struggle, then what does it mean for us to rejoice in that welcome today?

It means we become people who make room. People who stand between the vulnerable and the violent. People who part seas of exclusion, fear, and prejudice.

It means our welcome is not passive. It is active. It is courageous. Sometimes it is costly. And it reshapes the world so that all can walk through on dry land.

Our welcome is transformational. And sometimes we encounter it in the most unexpected places. In the days after 9/11, Ground Zero was a landscape of unimaginable devastation—steel twisted like ribbon, ash covering everything, silence heavy enough to feel like a second collapse. Rescue workers moved through the ruins with a kind of reverent exhaustion, searching for survivors, for remains, for anything that might speak of hope.

One day, a construction worker named called out to Fr. Brian Jordan who had been ministering to firefighters, families, and recovery crews since the moment the towers fell.

“Father,” he said, “you need to see this.”

Together they walked through the wreckage of, stepping over beams and broken concrete, weaving through the skeletal remains of a building that once held thousands of ordinary workdays. And then they stopped.

There, standing upright in the rubble, were two steel beams fused together in the unmistakable shape of a cross.

Fr. Jordan later said that when he saw it, he felt something shift inside him, like a breath of God moving through a place that had forgotten how to breathe.

He didn’t see the cross as a sign that God caused the tragedy. He saw a sign that God had not abandoned the people living through it.

A sign that love still rises. A sign that hope still stands. A sign that even in the worst human suffering, God’s presence refuses to disappear.

Fr. Jordan became the cross’s protector. He advocated for it when cleanup crews wanted to discard it. He prayed beside it with firefighters who had lost their brothers. He stood before it with families who had no remains to bury. He insisted that this cross—this unexpected symbol of love in the ashes—should be preserved, honored, and eventually placed where people could come and remember.

That cross became a place of prayer, of lament, of courage. A place where people could stand in the shadow of tragedy and still say, "God is here."

God is here! That is why we rejoice no matter how dark it seems. We rejoice in a welcome that widens our circle. We live in a world that is hungry for that kind of welcome. A world that is weary from division. A world that is aching for liberation. A world that *needs communities like ours to stand in the cloud of God's presence and say:*

You are safe here. You are loved here. You are free here. You are welcome here. God is here!

May our rejoicing be liberation. May our rejoicing open pathways to courage. May our rejoicing bring justice. May our rejoicing be grounded in love.

Amen.