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Belonging

Paul's Notion of Autarkēs

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I worked in youth ministry part-time all through college and then full-time for a few years after college. I worked with a high school youth group at a large church in Northern California, in the heart of Silicon Valley. One of the greatest privileges of my life was leading a weekly small group of girls—in our ministry we called them STRIVE groups. STRIVE groups had an open-door policy; anyone and everyone was welcome at any time. Some girls came and went, but there was a core group who stayed the same. This group of girls and I started meeting their freshman year in high school, and we met every single week through their high school graduation.

We went through a lot together over those four years: the normal stresses of high school, of course—body image, their latest romantic crush, frustrations with friends, their parents' rules. We served others together: feeding the homeless in Los Angeles, caring for children with disabilities in the Dominican Republic, building houses in Mexican villages. And I got to be there for the milestones: the sports tryouts, driver's tests, the SATs, applying to college. I took pictures before every school dance. That STRIVE group and I also went through some really hard times together: deaths and divorce, a father's abuse, bulimia, and

bullying. One of the girls was hospitalized with a life-threatening illness and barely survived.

Through it all, through all our striving, and in truth in spite of ourselves, we became a real community—the kind of community where those teenage girls could come and be their true, authentic, messy selves and know they belonged and were loved, no matter what.

We became the kind of community that transforms lives.

I don't take any of that for granted. After a few years, the girls told me that before they met me, one of them had said, "Her name's Michal Beth. She's probably ugly." Another girl confessed that for nearly a year, she had only attended STRIVE group because her mother paid her to do so. I said, "Oh, great, so you're hanging out with me for money?"—to which she responded, "Well, not now. Now I hang out with you for free!"

That's the goal, right? We want them to hang out with us for free. But it's not easy, because in many ways, today's youth are not free. Most parents won't pay their kids to go to a church youth group. Some parents, perhaps, would prefer they stayed away. High school students have to go to practice, or rehearsal, or a job. They have to get into a top university, ideally with a scholarship. The animating idea behind all of this parental striving is that if their children succeed at such things, they will find happiness in life. Parents want their children to grow up and be content.

We find a passage in the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi that might well serve as a kind of manifesto for parents today. At the end of the letter, in Philippians 4:11–13, Paul thanks the recipients for supporting him, and then he says: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through the one who gives me strength."

One English dictionary defines "content" as being "in a state of peaceful happiness." That sounds about right when it comes to

parenting, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want their kids to be in a state of peaceful happiness in any and all circumstances?

Still, if I'm honest, for a long time, I didn't like this passage. It didn't seem fair or realistic to me. Constant, peaceful happiness is impossible. And we don't have to look far for the evidence of that. As humans we're vulnerable. Brené Brown, a sociologist who researches vulnerability,¹ has asked thousands of people the question, What is vulnerability to you? Vulnerability, people told her, is

- presenting my product to the world and getting no response;
- waiting for the biopsy to come back;
- getting pregnant after two miscarriages;
- signing up my wife for hospice care;
- sending my third-grader off to school with his violin excited to try out for first chair and knowing he's not going to get it.

But it's not just suffering and pain. Joy can make us vulnerable, too. People told Brown that vulnerability is

- driving my newborn baby home from the hospital;
- saying "I love you" first;
- taking art lessons again after decades;
- my wedding day;
- celebrating the life of my grandmother who recently passed away.

Those are the uncontrollable moments when we come face to face with the precarity and fragility of life. Perhaps it's easier to be content in moments of joyful vulnerability. But what about the more difficult times? I want to say to Paul, "Really? We're supposed to be in a state of peaceful happiness in any and all circumstances?"

Several years ago I faced the fragility of my own life when I went whitewater rafting on the Nile River. You should know I am not an

¹ Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connections and Courage*, audiobook narrated by Brené Brown, Sounds True, 2013.

adventurous person by nature. I like my books and my couch, in my house, by my fire. But one summer I was teaching at a seminary near the source of the Nile in Uganda, and my husband convinced me to go.

“It’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” he said. Right, I thought, because it will end my lifetime. But I decided to do it. I was terrified because the Nile has some of the world’s roughest waters, including Class 5 rapids, which are the highest level you’re allowed to navigate commercially.

When we arrived, I felt vindicated in my fear for two reasons: one was that I learned the Ugandans had labeled the rapids with disconcerting names like “Jaws,” or the really infamous one, called simply “The Bad Place”; the second was that I noticed villagers lining up on a cliff above the river. When I asked one of them why they were lining up, he responded, “We like to watch white people pay to do stupid things.” (Frankly I thought that was an apt description.)

Spoiler alert: I survived. I didn’t drown that day, but our boat did flip over and dump us out more than once. Every single time a wave would hoist us up, and, suspended in midair, I’d stare down at the water churning violently beneath me—and in a split second I’d be launched headfirst and helpless into a pit of froth and foam. Down . . . down . . . my lungs, burning . . . a thought would hit me: this is how I am going to die. And every time I’d pop back up, gasping for air and eager to climb back onto the boat to safety.

To be heavy-handed about it, this strikes me as such a marvelous analogy for life. After all, life sometimes feels like you’re hanging suspended, frozen in that eternal second of uncertainty, when you don’t know if the raft to which you’ve been clinging so desperately will level out and save you or if you’ll be dumped out into the violence and chaos below. Brown’s examples of vulnerability I shared feel like “suspended life raft” moments—when life threatens to throw us over into the Bad Place and contentment just seems impossible. I’m sure we all could add to the list:

- We could add my friend who had to tell her teenaged son not to wear the hoodie he got for his birthday because it's not safe for African Americans to wear hoodies in white neighborhoods.
- We could add gun violence. A few weeks ago, my six-year-old son was upset because my husband and I were going out. I said, "Buddy, you know grown-ups always come back." And he looked up at me, eyes wide and serious, and said, "Not if someone shoots you."
- We could add the parents whose children are taken from them at the US border because they don't have the correct legal documents to enter the country.

Are we supposed to tell these folks that the Bible says to be content in all circumstances? If so, I have a problem with that. Sometimes contentment feels not just impossible or unwelcome but offensive, even obscene.

All of this means that the parental goal of helping children achieve happiness is like trying to will the rapids to stop being rapids. It's impossible.

When we tell young people that happiness should be their goal, we're setting them up to fail from the start. And when they keep encountering heartache, they'll feel like they've failed. Maybe they'll feel like we lied to them. And they'd be right.

The problem with that passage in Philip-
pians is that "content" is not a great English
translation of the Greek original. The word
Paul uses—*autarkēs*—is rare in the New Tes-

**Happiness is not
the goal, but joy is.
So we need to
know and be able to
explain the
difference.**

tament. *Autarkēs* means "self-sufficient" or
"independent." Thus Paul says in verses 4:11–
12, "Not that I am referring to being in need. I have learned to be self-
sufficient with whatever I have." A popular word right now in parenting
and educational literature is "grit." Most parents will admit that constant

contentment is unattainable, but independence, self-sufficiency, and grit sound like worthy goals for our children.

Contemporary American culture seriously values competence. Calling someone needy is not a compliment. Our culture tells us that if we need help, there's something wrong with us. We're weak. And even deeper, underlying all that, we're told that if we're weak, we're less valu-

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able. Is Paul saying we should aim not for neediness but for self-sufficiency in any and all circumstances? This picture of Paul works for us: Paul as American superhero.

But there's a problem with that, too. We all know this. Total self-sufficiency is a myth.

Life is far more like the raft, tossed high above the whitewater rapids of the Nile. Reality is hard and unfair, and we are limited. We can't do life alone.

Telling young people that not needing others should be their goal also sets them up to fail. When we tell them to be omnicompetent, we're giving them the wrong job description. We're telling them it's their job to control the rapids or, at the very least, to ensure that their raft won't capsize. And then when it does flip (because it inevitably will), as they tumble out into the waves and think they're about to drown, they'll also be thinking that they're failures. Or that we lied to them. And they'd be right about us.

But notice this: self-sufficiency wasn't actually Paul's reality. Remember that just before 4:11, Paul thanks the Philippians for their help, which implies that he needed their help in the first place. He's also writing to them from prison. He's clearly not self-sufficient. Paul's needy.

So if it's not peaceful happiness, and it's not independence, then what does Paul mean when he says, "I have learned to be *autarkēs* . . . in any and all circumstances"?

Paul adopts this word *autarkēs* from Greek philosophy. In Stoicism *autarkeia* was a high virtue. To be self-sufficient meant just what it sounds like: you, in yourself, are sufficient. Enough. The Stoics taught that being *autarkēs* means that one is unaffected by outward circumstances. Being

autarkēs means that you have the internal resources to handle anything, because you know that who you are is not defined by whether you're admired or despised, in prison or in the penthouse. If you're *autarkēs*, then all the posturing, comparisons, and judgments that you see every day are pointless. Hierarchies collapse, our culture's messages about worth fall away, and you're free simply to be.

Paul uses the Stoic word *autarkēs*. But the really crucial part of the passage in Philippians is 4:13, where he adds a twist that turns the concept on its head: he says he is *autarkēs* through the one who gives him strength (literally, strengthener). The Stoics taught that self-sufficiency results from rigorously training the self to detach from emotion and relationship. (We still use the adjective "stoic" in that way.) In contrast Paul says he has learned the "secret" that self-sufficiency comes not from oneself but from the God who is the strengthener.

Let's dig into this.

An Anatomy of Autarkeia

According to Paul, being *autarkēs*—sufficient in one's self—comes not from detaching from reality or relationships but from facing reality in relationship with the Spirit who is love. In other words we don't tell ourselves to be happy no matter what or isolate ourselves from others in self-protection disguised as bravery. Instead we face reality head-on, because strength and sufficiency are God-given.

This is what gives Paul the strength to go on. He knows that he's most likely going to be killed, just like the one he follows was killed. But he also knows he's free in the midst of those circumstances, because he's *autarkēs*. He knows that the price of following Jesus is high. But the reward is real freedom—the freedom to be fully ourselves and know that we're fully loved.

Maya Angelou said, "You are only free when you realize you belong no place—you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high.

The reward is great.”² Paul might say that it’s when we recognize that we belong to God that we belong everywhere and nowhere, all at once.

We often think of belonging as fitting in, and we often teach our children to fit in by following rules, both spoken and unspoken. True belonging, however, isn’t about either of those things. True belonging sometimes means having the courage not to fit in—the courage to stand alone. That kind of belonging is freedom. It isn’t about circumstances at all. It’s unconditional.

What if we look to Paul’s life as an example of what that kind of freedom looks like? Paul started out as Saul. Saul was a rule follower. He fit in quite well with his people. He belonged. Then he met Jesus, and according to the book of Acts, there was a plot to kill him (9:23–25). After escaping that, he was later stoned and left for dead (14:8–22); a violent mob acted out against him (19:23–34); he was attacked by Jews and then arrested by Romans (chaps. 21–23).

The irony, of course, is that Jesus’s self-proclaimed mission was to bring freedom to the captives, and yet Paul’s life was punctuated by imprisonment, rejection, and persecution. But this irony is instructive. Paul was a prisoner literally. He was marginalized and judged by those in power. He was no longer following their rules and no longer fit in. But on a deeper level, Paul was free already. That’s what made him brave.

The price is high. But the reward is great.

The reward is the freedom that being *autarkēs* can bring.

To be clear, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t work against injustices in the world because we have inner freedom. That is a particularly insidious argument that Christians have made for far too long: stay a slave, or stay in an abusive marriage. Don’t complain, because you’re free on the inside. That is not what I mean.

I want to take a minute and talk to the white folks reading this: white people, we especially need to renounce the “stay where you are

2 Maria Popova, “Maya Angelou on Freedom: A 1973 Conversation with Bill Moyers,” Brain Pickings, accessed 21 November, 2018, www.brainpickings.org/2013/06/14/maya-angelou-bill-moyers-1973/.

because Christ makes you free” argument, because we especially have been the ones to use that argument and benefit from it. We need to face the painful ways that we’re complicit in the systems we condemn. It’s like that Ugandan gentleman told me: white people pay money for stupid things. We need to have the courage to take responsibility when those stupid things aren’t about endangering ourselves and our bodies but about pushing other people out of the raft and into the rapids.

That means having the often painful conversations and doing the difficult work of admitting that as white people in a world that values whiteness, we’ve benefited from the oppression, exclusion, and suffering of our sisters and brothers of color, and we need to work actively against such racism.

Of course we find all kinds of reasons in addition to race to push others out of the boat. Here’s a youth group story about pushing others out of the boat. As I mentioned before, I worked at a large church in the heart of Silicon Valley, one of the wealthiest areas of this country. Right across the railroad tracks was East Palo Alto (EPA), one of the most dangerous, poorest urban areas of our country. These two communities are the stuff of stereotypes—two totally different worlds literally separated by the railroad tracks.

Our high school ministry decided that we wanted to reflect kingdom values by reaching out to kids from EPA, so they’d know youth group was a place where everyone belongs. One way we did so was by getting connected with a home for teen mothers. My STRIVE group started babysitting for them, and over time we got to know them well. Eventually the church started providing childcare at our trips and mid-week youth gatherings so the teen moms could come.

One day the mother of one of the Silicon Valley girls pulled another leader aside to complain about the presence of teen moms at youth group. She said, “Do you want good kids to look at that and see that you’re condoning sexual immorality? Stop letting teen moms come, or I won’t let my daughter attend this church anymore.” (She used language I won’t repeat.)

When I heard about what had happened, I was livid. I wanted to say, if kids can't hear that they belong at church no matter what, where can they hear that? Is that not the message of the gospel?

She was pushing those girls out of the raft.

We all know people like this in the church today, don't we? These are the Christians who give other Christians a bad name—those who emphasize morality and legalism over grace and forgiveness; those who value being righteous and right over being humble and hopeful.

Jesus had some opinions about those kinds of people. Take the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

I like Eugene Peterson's translation of Jesus's final point in verse 14: "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face" (MSG, Lk 14:11). When I heard about that Silicon Valley mom at our youth group, I wished she could see that she was being like the Pharisee in Jesus's parable. Her nose was in the air, and eventually she was going to end up flat on her face before God.

And I was really thankful that I wasn't like her.

Then I realized it. There I was, thanking God that I wasn't like that sinful woman. There I was, throwing her out of the boat. She's the kind of Christian who gives me a bad name. She doesn't belong at my church.

Jesus's teachings must always begin with us. I learned in that moment that, like the Pharisee in the parable, I needed to pay attention to myself. I don't mean to say that what that mother said was acceptable. What I'm saying, rather, is that her behavior and her heart were not my responsibility. I needed to reorient what was going on in my heart.

If our Christianity focuses on identifying what's wrong with others, on throwing others out of the boat, then we've taken a wrong turn. We're no longer following Jesus.

Far too often in the church, we say every kid belongs unconditionally at youth group. But when it comes down to it, we find all kinds of reasons to exclude them. Our intentions might be good. But we're threatened, hostage to our biases and fears. We're not free. And we're not brave.

Paul's notion of being *autarkēs*—being content in the knowledge that our selfhood is sufficient, that our strength comes from the Spirit who created and unites us—is a freedom that expands our hearts so that everyone is welcome. Not all behavior is acceptable, but everyone belongs no matter what. That kind of freedom facilitates work against injustice because it means we're resilient. We're defiantly joyful in the face of challenge and adversity.

On the other hand, so much suffering and pain come from the absence of unconditional love and belonging. Young people know this intimately. The researcher I mentioned before, Brené Brown, has interviewed middle and high schoolers all around the country, and they say things like “Not belonging at school is really hard. But it's nothing compared to what it feels like when you don't belong at home,”³ like when teens don't live up to their parents' expectations or parents are embarrassed because their children aren't as cool as the parents want them to be. What's really hard is when parents don't pay attention to their children's lives, or when they don't like who their children are or what they like to do.

3 Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Avery, 2015), 232.

Young people long to know that they're worthy of love and belonging. Period. No matter what. When they find that, the result is joy.

Here's how I define joy: joy is a deep inner sense of delight and well-being.

Just before Paul discusses *autarkēs*, he declares, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). The word translated "rejoice" here is *chairō*. There are two important dimensions of *chairō* that get lost in English translation. First it is related to "charisma," the Greek word for gift. Rejoicing—that is, having joy—is a gift. And what makes something a gift? It's free, not earned. There are no strings attached. God's free gift is that we are worthy of love and belonging—apart from circumstance—simply because we belong to the God who loved us first. No matter what.

Second, *chairō* is related to well-being. It's actually used as a greeting in Greek: "Farewell," says Paul. "Be well." *Chairō*. Rejoice.⁴ Joy comes from knowing that, as the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich put it, "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."⁵ No one and nothing can take that well-being away (Rom. 8:38).

Importantly, this does not mean that all is going well. Some think joy is about things going well in life. You get the promotion, you buy the house, you and your family are healthy. But that doesn't ring true in my experience. Some of the most joyful people I've ever met have been in truly dire circumstances—people who suffer from poverty, illness, and prejudice but who nevertheless know how to love.

It's countercultural, because our culture has conditioned us to believe that power, prestige, and popularity will make us happy.

4 *Chairō* was used in greetings (welcome, good day, hail to you, I am glad to see you) in the imperative mood implying a wish for wellbeing or happiness to the recipient (Mt 26:49). *Chairō* is used in the introduction to a letter (Ac 15:23; 23:26; James 1:1). *Chairō* is translated "Hail!" several times in the Gospels (Mt 26:49, 27:29, Mk 15:18, Lk 1:27).

5 Mirabai Starr, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich: A New Translation* (Charlottesville: Hampton Road, 2013), xiii.

We breathe in that message for so long and in so many ways that it becomes habitual. Letting go of those messages is counterintuitive and often difficult. But it's also necessary.

When I went rafting on the Nile, our guide gave us very clear instructions. He said, "When you fall out—because you will—when the raft capsizes, you will want to hold onto your oar. You will want to fight the rapids, to swim hard to the top and fight for air. But you have to let go." It was counterintuitive, but the way to survive, he told us, is to let go—let go of the oar and let your body go limp; trust that the water will carry you and spit you out downstream. He was right.

Joy similarly depends on letting go of who our culture tells us to be, letting go of the fight to earn our worthiness, to get to the top, and instead trusting that the Spirit of love will carry us where we need to go.

Throughout the Bible and Christian tradition, we have example after example of people like Paul who rejoice in the midst of things not going well. One of my favorite definitions of joy is Karl Barth's: joy, Barth said, is the "defiant nevertheless."⁶ This seems honest to me.

Joy isn't the absence of suffering and pain. It's the defiant nevertheless that says: I may have lost my job, or lost my spouse, or lost my reputation. Things are not going well. Nevertheless I'm *autarkēs*. I'm sufficient through the one who gives me strength. I'm loved and worthy of belonging. No matter what.

Joy is the defiant nevertheless that says: I was bullied at school today, or I was rejected by my dream school, or I might not make my parents proud. Nevertheless I trust that I'm *autarkēs*. I'm sufficient through the one who gives me strength. I'm loved and worthy of belonging. No matter what.

This kind of joy reverberates out and changes lives far beyond what we could ever imagine. Remember the STRIVE group I mentioned before? Fast forward a few years. One of the girls, Kate, is in her second year of medical school on the East Coast, and she's excelling. She's

6 Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 120.

found her calling. One day she got a call from one of the teen moms for whom our group used to babysit (we'll call her Jay). Kate and Jay have stayed friends, despite their drastically different life paths. Jay didn't go to college. She has two kids from two different dads, and she's pregnant with her third. She's addicted to drugs, and the state is putting her children, including the soon-to-be-born infant, into foster care. On the phone that day, Jay said that the only person in the world she trusts to raise her children is Kate.

So Kate adopted them. Think about this: she's in her second year in medical school, all the way across the country, without family, and she adopted her friend's three children. People told Kate she'd never finish medical school. People told her she was throwing away her future, her happiness, and her independence.

But Kate was far too free and far too brave to believe them. She's an ob-gyn now, with twins of her own, raising an amazing family where everyone is welcome. Everyone belongs. Her life is hardly easy. Nevertheless Kate is one of the most defiantly joyful people I know.

Like Kate—like Paul—we can be either hostage or host. We can be hostage to fear, worrying about the Bad Places of this life, or we can be free enough and brave enough to host the Spirit of peace and joy in a world that desperately needs it.

My sister, Brynn, is a pastor at a church in Salem, Massachusetts, where the Salem witch trials were held in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today Salem is a headquarters for the occult, Wicca, and modern-day witchcraft. A few years ago, my sister's church hosted a dinner and invited a group of international students from nearby Salem State University. They didn't yet have their own building, so they rented out a theater space downtown. When they arrived the night of the dinner, they learned that occultists had rented out the space downstairs to practice rituals of dark magic.

At that point Brynn's community had some choices. They could sit upstairs and pray against darkness; they could try actively to stop the rituals; they could quietly leave and go elsewhere. Instead they spontaneously invited everyone to join them for dinner: this group of

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Christians, college kids from all over the world, and practitioners of the occult all shared a meal together. My sister describes it as a sacred time, full of joy, where they built relationships that continue today. All because instead of being hostages to fear, they were hosts. Later, reflecting on that night, Brynn said: “After all, the name of our city—Salem—stems from the Hebrew word ‘shalom.’” Peace. Wholeness. Well-being.

That’s what our youth need to hear. They don’t need to hear they should chase happiness, be omniscient, or avoid being weak and needy. They need to hear that who they are in themselves is sufficient. They need to hear they can be *autarkēs* not just when they’re already peaceful or happy but also in the suspended life raft moments. Indeed in any and all circumstances. That’s when they’ll find the freedom and strength to live courageous and meaningful lives, to stand alone when they need to, to ask for help when they need to, to be free enough and brave enough to belong everywhere and nowhere at once, because they belong to the God who is love.

Isn’t that what parents really want for their children? Isn’t that what we all want? And isn’t that really what this world needs?

The price may be high. But the reward is great. Amen.