

Tuesday, August 12, 2025

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Dear friends, family, and partners in Christ,

I pray that these last few weeks of summer are yielding a spirit refreshed and a body restored. We have just entered summer vacation, as classes and final exams for the first semester ended last week. Our campus is undergoing major construction as the hill is widened 14 meters, so facilities are closed while trees are felled and tons of earth are moved. Temps are in the high 90s every day, so as a Minnesotan, I wilt in the heat. But I try to get out early in the morning to walk or pick weeds.

A few musings are attached in Number 109. Please don't hesitate to let me know if you or someone you know would like to be added or taken off this mailing list. We have had some troubles in the last few months with letters being returned due to outdated email addresses and so forth. This would be a good time to check and see if your church office addresses or personnel have changed, and if you need to provide a new address please send that along so I can update the mailing list.

May joy be yours,  
Jackie and Patrick

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# The Bencke Family in Japan



August 2025: 109 番



This is a path I take when I walk to campus. In the early summer, these “weeds” sprout up in the cracks between the pavement and the walls. While the asphalt is not breathtaking and concrete encompasses about 98% of the picture, the green, purple, and white colors are central. Much like our lives where the background is fairly ordinary, we can find remarkable joy in its midst.

## Joy

I don’t know about you, but for me, scrolling through the news on any given day, well, joyful things seem to be hard to come by. Whether it’s related to politics, climate, budgets, job security, health, or any other perceived calamity, finding joy in between the headlines takes work. Much like a relationship, recognizing joy takes some work. A couple of years ago, I attended a conference where Willie Jennings was the keynote speaker. He speaks of joy as an act of resistance against despair. It’s counterintuitive in a world filled with suffering. Jesus differentiates joy from fleeting happiness, something that is not dependent on circumstances. Joy is a gift and a deeper state of spirituality, ever-present, even in our sorrows. And while I appreciate the sentiment behind her thinking, joy is more than just the subject of Marie Kondo’s catch phrase of “does it spark joy” when you are cleaning out your closets.

In North America, another school year is approaching. Teaching is one of those professions where it can be difficult to find joy in our day-to-day grind. As the bureaucratic expectations continue to mount while resources dwindle, digging deep to find enthusiasm can be challenging, but there is deep fulfillment when students shine with the thrill of their achievements.

As a teacher in a missionary context, bringing different perspectives to the classroom or to the rehearsal requires an extra measure of considering whether my perspective is pushing a western version of Christianity or authentically opening doors to see the world through Scripture. This requires that I am both a student and a teacher at the same time. Figuring out how the Word is relevant for students in the music they prepare is (or should be) the nucleus of each rehearsal or class. Some days, I fail. Some days, students “get it.” My act of resistance is knowing that our Lord can redeem those days or moments when we feel we aren’t measuring up. Faith is knowing that God redeems all of our efforts and shortcomings for His kingdom. All of it.

Recently, we have had a few opportunities to re-connect with graduates who participated in our classes and activities. One student, who was a chapel choir member, got married. In addition to asking me to play for her wedding, which was incredibly humbling, for her wedding ceremony she asked a couple of other graduates who were choir members to sing a few of the songs they had learned while in our chapel choir. What unfiltered joy filled my heart when I heard them sing praise to the Lord once again!

Another former student, from looong ago in our Menomonie days, spent a wonderful weekend with us in early June. What a privilege to meet his kids and spend time talking about how his life has unfolded since graduating from high school a few decades ago. It was a gift to reminisce about the past, share about the present, and ponder future endeavors. To be able to pray for student, past and present, is a gift in and of itself. I was reminded that our God is a God of yesterday, today, and forever. While our lives are on a linear path of time, God's time is a singular unit and our lives are meant for His purpose.

Patrick also went to a reunion for graduates who are currently teaching in primary and secondary schools. Again, their recollections of having meaningful experiences as they encountered Christianity for the first time in choir or as instrumentalists for chapel events made my heart soar with hope that those lyrics sung continue to have the ability to penetrate deeply into their soul.

These reunions allow us to look back, reflect, and pause in wonder at how God is faithful to us and is always working behind the scenes of what we see in our limited perspectives. I love it when I can get a 30,000 foot view of how students' lives unfurl after we push them out of the nest at graduation. Knowing that the Lord is the wellspring of joy, I can say with confidence that these moments quench my thirst for joy in what often feels like an ambivalent world.

In these final weeks of summer, before the classrooms are prepared, I pray that all who read these musings are able to take a moment to pause, take a sip of your favorite beverage, and point to the evidence of God's faithfulness throughout your personal and professional journeys. And may that, in itself, bring you joy.



**Former student, Yuki, and her husband.**



**Patrick and two former choir members at a reunion for teachers.**



**Former Menomonie student, Dave, and his two remarkable children enjoying a day at Kumamoto Castle**