

Peace That Passes Understanding

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Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, 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 these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

FEAR FILLED

We live in a world filled with fear.

The folks on TV specialize in serving up the fear of the week. This week there is fear about the spread of Ebola and the barbaric practices of the so-called Islamic State.

Politicians also specialize in fear. If they can make us afraid of their opponent, they can win elections. That's why we have been subjected to a barrage of negative ads. Promoting fear can be a winning strategy.

Most of us have personal fears. We are afraid of illness and failing health. We are afraid of losing an important relationship. We are afraid of losing our job. We are afraid of death. We are afraid of being alone.

Sometimes our fear is more general. We're worried but we're not sure why. We call this nonspecific fear anxiety.

The list of things that bring makes us afraid goes on and on.

And yet this passage suggests that we can live a life without fear. In fact, Paul seems to command the Philippians not to be afraid. He tells them, "Don't worry about anything."

Now I know that for some people worry can be debilitating, but aren't there some things that we should worry about? Anxiety and fear can warn us of impending danger.

When Paul suggests that we shouldn't worry about anything, it seems like an impossible and even foolish command. Frederick Buechner says that it's like telling a woman with a bad head cold not to sniffle and sneeze so much!

And yet I'm attracted to this passage. I want to just say "no" to fear in my life.

And I can do it for a while.

But, then those old fears come creeping into my life with a vengeance.

PEACE THAT SURPASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING

On our own we can't banish fear, but today the Scripture reminds us that we are not on our own. We have an ally in our battle with fear.

God in Christ has come to take that fear from us.

"Fear not" is one of the most common commands in the Bible. It was what the angels said when they announced the coming of Jesus to the shepherds in the field, and it was the message that Jesus and the early church proclaimed as well.

Despite evidence to the contrary fear is not going to win the day. God is going to win the day.

Several weeks ago I mentioned that there was a time when I memorized a lot of Scripture. I had to admit that I have forgotten most of the passages that I had memorized. But, on the other hand, some of those verses have stayed with me. They became life verses to which I have returned again and again.

And I've noticed that I've used those verses more in my ministry.

For example, you may have noticed that my favorite benediction comes from verse 7 of today's lesson. It talks about "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding."

A person in our Bible challenged me to explain that phrase. What does it mean to have the peace of God that passes all understanding?

I guess the short answer is that I can't explain it. The peace of God as the verse says "surpasses all understanding." In the final analysis things like peace and hope and joy are gifts from God. We cannot attain them on our own.

On the other hand, this passage does suggest some things we can do to help us experience this peace that surpasses all understanding.

PEACE THROUGH ENCOURAGEMENT

First, we can find peace through encouragement. We can help each other through the rough patches. We can offer support and encouragement to those who are anxious and afraid.

There were two women in the Philippian church (Euodia and Syntyche) who were having some sort of disagreement.

Paul said that these women were leaders in the church at Philippi. Their names were in the book of life. They had struggled beside him in the work of the gospel.

But, now, because of their disagreement it was necessary for Clement and some of the other co-workers in the church to help these two women “be of the same mind in the Lord.”

Churches (like all organizations) are filled with anxious and fearful people. And sometimes we respond to each other out of fear instead of faith.

Paul said, “Let’s help each other remember what is really important. Let’s talk about what we have in common instead of emphasizing our areas of disagreement.”

Unfortunately, the church has not done a very good job of this. And this has caused needless anxiety in the church in the past and today. We have emphasized our disagreements instead of emphasizing our points of agreement.

This has caused many to turn away from the faith. If we believe in a God of grace, why can’t we be more gracious toward each other?

We experience the peace of God when we are at peace with each other. And in order to achieve that peace we have to focus on what is really important. We have to make the main thing the main thing.

We have to help each other remember what it means to have the mind of Christ. In this way the Christian community becomes a source of peace instead of a source of anxiety. We learn in a practical way what John wrote about in his first letter. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear ...” (1 John 4:18)

The community of faith is a community that casts out fear. And we cast out fear by cultivating a gentle spirit. In verse 5 Paul wrote, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

The word gentleness can better be translated forbearance. Forbearance means tolerance and mercy. Why do we treat people with tolerance and mercy? We treat them this way because we believe that the Lord is near.

We believe that just as God forgave us we should forgive others. And this life based on forgiveness translates into people who have a gentle spirit and

the firm conviction that the Lord is near. We sense the presence of God when we love one another as he has first loved us. This gives us peace.

PEACE THROUGH WORSHIP

The second thing that helps us experience the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding is worship. Paul told the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.”

When a teacher says something twice that means it is going to be on the test. You should write it down. Paul thinks rejoicing in the Lord is so important that he repeats that command.

One of the reasons I like to sing is that it helps me worship. It helps me rejoice in the Lord.

Rejoicing and worship is one of those right brain creative activities. And rejoicing in the Lord can bring us comfort in the most difficult moments of our life.

Recently I’ve been reading Tom Long’s book on the Christian funeral entitled “Accompany Them With Singing.” Tom suggests that in life’s most difficult moment singing allows us to remember and reinforce the promise of the resurrection. Singing is not optional but a vital component in our very practical witness to the resurrection.

I know from personal experience that this is true. Singing in the face of grief and difficult times allows us to gain the peace of God that surpasses all understanding.

That’s why music is important in the church. Music helps us rejoice in the Lord. Music reinforces the gospel message. Music points us to a truth that cannot be contained in words, this peace that surpasses all understanding.

That’s also why music is not a performance for the congregation. Music is not something that can be skipped by those who don’t sing very well. Music is about worship.

If you want to put it in performance terms, in worship we are all a part of the “show” and the audience for our performance is none other than God.

We don't rejoice in the musical ability of the choir. We don't rejoice in the technique of the organist. We don't rejoice in the ability of the minister to preach. We don't rejoice in the architecture of the building.

We rejoice in the Lord. Again I will say it, "We rejoice in the Lord ... always."

Presbyterians have long said that worship is job one. The first question of the shorter catechism tells us that our chief end is to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

Again I will say rejoice.

PEACE THROUGH PRAYER

The third thing that helps us experience the peace of God is prayer.

According to Paul it is prayer that enables us to overcome anxiety. In our passage for today, he tells us, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

In a sense this whole passage can be understood as a passage about prayer. When I teach on prayer I use a little memory device to help people recall all the parts of a prayer, ACTS.

The "A" is adoration (rejoice in the Lord always). The "C" is confession. Confession allows us to be reconciled with God and with each other. Like Euodia and Syntyche we encourage each other to "be of the same mind in the Lord."

And then verse six brings us to the "T" and the "S" in our pneumatic device, thanksgiving and supplication.

Paul suggests that these two need to go together. For every prayer request we should include a word of thanksgiving for something God has already given us.

Prayer and supplication with thanksgiving is the formula for a successful prayer. This is one of those things that won't make any sense to you until you put it into practice. I've told some of you this before.

Back when I entered the ministry I found the going very tough. There was a big difference between talking about doing ministry and actually practicing it. Assuming the role of pastor was not an easy transition for me.

Paul told me to have no anxiety about anything, but I had anxiety about everything. So, I began to journal. I began to write down my prayers, my fears and my thoughts about passages of Scripture that I was reading.

And when I read those reflections a month or two later I was shocked to learn that most of my prayers had been answered positively. But, I hadn't uttered one word of thanks.

Thanksgiving for what God has done for us in the past and for the blessings of the present help us ask for what we need in the future in the right spirit. We are emboldened by the past to trust God with our future.

Indeed that is the whole point of the Bible. We read about the mighty acts of God in the past and remember that the same God walks with us into our future.

Give it a try. Whenever you make a request of God in prayer, pair that request with a word of thanksgiving.

And if you really want to be transformed, write down what you have said in prayer, and then look at it several months down the road. I think this will help you lower your anxiety level considerably.

PEACE THROUGH POSITIVE THINKING

The fourth and final thing that helps us experience the peace of God is positive thinking.

Yes, it seems that the apostle has turned into Norman Vincent Peale in verse 8.

Paul writes, “Finally, beloved, 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 these things.”

For those of you who don't know Norman Vincent Peale, he was a minister who wrote a popular book entitled, “The Power of Positive Thinking” in the 1950s. His book was sort of a combination of pop psychology and theology.

Both theologians and psychologists roundly criticized the book at the time.

But, more recent studies suggest that positive thoughts and emotions do indeed enable us to imagine more possibilities for the future and broaden the skills we already have.

On the other hand if our life is filled with negative thoughts and emotions we tend to become survival oriented and don't think about the future as much.

[Here's a link to a Huffington Post article for those who may be reading this. (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-clear/positive-thinking_b_3512202.html)]

In my experience Christians of all stripes and society in general has done just the opposite of what Paul suggests in verse 8. Instead of focusing on the commendable we have focused on the negative.

And that limits our ability to dream about the future.

Now I'm not saying we should be like an ostrich and just plant our heads in the sand. We need to be informed about world events, and the world news is often bad.

But, we need to take responsibility for how much of that stuff comes into our lives. Instead of leaving the news channel on all day just watch one program or better yet read the newspaper. And then take time to focus on the positive.

The church at Philippi had a lot of bad news to contend with.

The church's founder, Paul was in prison.
The church was in turmoil over theological controversies.
The church was undergoing persecution by the larger society that promoted the worship of idolatrous gods.

But, in the midst of such a volatile and dangerous situation, Paul urges the Philippians to concentrate on the positive.

Think about what is pure. Think about what is pleasing. And I would also say that we should surround ourselves with people who are positive as well.

A positive environment enhances the possibility of peace ... personal peace and a broader peace.

All of us struggle with anxiety and fear. I would ask you to try some of the suggestions that Paul gives us in our passage for today.

Seek the help of others. Make worship a priority. Pray with an attitude of gratitude. Focus on the positive.

And you may just find that peace that comes from above, the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Amen.