

Trinity United Methodist Church

October 11, 2020

Laity Sunday

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Scripture: Philippians 4:1-9 (NIV)

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! **2** I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5** Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **8** Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. **9** Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Prayer

Lord, as we hear Your word this day, we pray for your wisdom and your insight and your practical discernment. Help us to understand, remember, and apply your words to our lives. In Your name, Lord, we pray. Amen.

Message

It has always amazed me how Paul, regardless of his personal circumstances, was always able to stay connected with the many churches he founded. His situation was not unlike what we are experiencing today. And yet, he was still able to stay connected to his churches and his people.

His letters reflect his continued contact with the events happening in each and every one of these churches, and his guidance and counsel to them. He did not focus on his own personal challenges, the years of imprisonment he has endured, or his house arrest, but on how he could lead his churches forward in their relationship with Christ. Paul was the epitome of a shepherd.

Some of you may remember a television program known as Candid Camera. Many years ago they had a skit that took place at an exclusive prep school, where all the students were well above average. The Candid Camera crew posed as career consultants who were going to advise these brilliant young students regarding potential career choices. What would be suited for each of them? What would be best for them on the basis of some tests that they were going to conduct. They seemed, to the students at least, to be quite authentic. One young man eagerly awaited the counselor's verdict. Surely the advisor would tell the boy, "You're going to be a college president, or a bank president, maybe even a research scientist." But no. The counselor said, "Son, after evaluating your tests, I've decided the job for you is to be a shepherd." The student didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. After all, who in his right mind would want to be a shepherd? Why devote your life to stupid sheep? Sheep that don't have enough sense to find their own way home?

The image of sheep and sheepfolds and shepherds is mostly a rural and eastern image, to be sure. But it is an image that can say a great deal to us today, even in our urban and industrialized world. The truths that cluster around the image of a shepherd and the sheep are found throughout the Bible, and they are important to us today. Aren't we all shepherds in one sense or another? Just ask any parent.

It seems strange that a man in prison would be telling a church to rejoice. But Paul's attitude teaches us all an important lesson. Our inner attitude does not have to reflect our outward circumstances. Paul is full of joy because he knew that no matter what happened to him, Jesus Christ was with him.

It's easy to get discouraged about unpleasant circumstances or to take unimportant events too seriously, particularly over these past few months as we ourselves have experienced the outbreak of the COVID virus throughout the world. In those days, if anyone had an excuse for worrying, it was the apostle Paul. His beloved Christian friends in Philippi were disagreeing with one another, and he couldn't be there to help them. We have no idea what Syntyche and Euodia were disputing about, but whatever it was, it was causing division within the church there. Added to these burdens was the fact that Paul could be put to death by the Romans at any time, at their whim. Yes, Paul himself had good reason to be worried, but he did not. Instead, he took time to explain to us the secret of victory over worry.

What is worry? The Greek word translated as “worry” in verse 6 literally means to be “pulled in different directions.” Our hopes pull us in one direction, our fears pull us in the opposite direction, and we get pulled apart. The old English from which the word “worry” comes literally means, “to strangle.” If you have ever really worried, you know how it does strangle a person. In fact, worry also has definite physical characteristics: Headaches, neck pains, back pains, even ulcers. Worry affects our thinking, our digestion, and even our coordination.

From the spiritual point of view, worry is wrong thinking in the mind and wrong feeling in the heart about circumstances, people, and things. Worry is the greatest thief of joy. It is not enough to tell ourselves to “just quit worrying about it,” because that doesn’t help us. Worry is an inside job, and it takes more than good intentions to defeat it.

The antidote to worry is a secure mind. “And the peace of God shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” When you have a secure mind, God guards you. With that type of protection, there’s no need to worry.

If we are to conquer worry and experience a secure mind, we must meet the conditions that God has laid down. There are three:

- Right praying, as evidenced from verses 6 and 7;
- Right thinking (verse 8);
- And right living (verse 9).

Paul did not write, “Pray about it.” He was too wise to do that. He used three different words to describe right praying. Those were prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving. Right praying involves all three of these. The word “prayer” is the general word for making your requests known to God. It carries the idea of adoration, devotion, and worship. Whenever we find ourselves worrying, our first action should be to get together with God, pray about it, worship Him. Adoration is what is needed. We must seek the greatness and the majesty of God for counsel. We must realize that God is great enough to solve any and all problems we might have.

Too often we rush into His presence. We hastily tell Him our needs, when we ought to be approaching His throne calmly and with deep reverence. The first step in right praying is adoration.

The second is “supplication,” an earnest sharing of our needs and our problems. There is no place for half-hearted or insincere prayer. While we know we are not heard for speaking a lot or running a lot of words together, we must realize that our Father wants us to be earnest in what we ask for, earnest in our prayers. This the way Jesus

prayed in the garden while his closest associates were lying there sleeping. Jesus was sweating great drops of blood. Supplication is not a matter of energy, but spiritual intensity.

After adoration and supplication comes appreciation. Giving thanks to God for all that He does and for His answers to our prayers. Certainly the Father enjoys hearing his children say “thank you,” just like any parent enjoys hearing their child say “thank you.” When Jesus healed ten lepers, only one of the ten returned to give thanks. Do you think the percentage now is any greater? Ten percent? We are eager to ask, but slow to appreciate.

You’ll note that right praying is not something every Christian is able to do immediately, because right praying depends on having the right frame of mind beforehand. This is why Paul’s formula for peace is found at the end of this book of Philippians and not at the beginning. We must first put into practice the guidance contained in the first three chapters of the book of Philippians if we are going to experience the secure mind that Paul identifies in chapter 4.

Paul counsels us to take everything to God in prayer. “Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything.” That was his admonition. We are prone to pray about the big things in our life, and we forget to pray about the so-called “little things,” until they grow and become big things. Talking to God about everything that concerns us and Him is the first step to a victory over worry.

The result is that the peace of God guards the heart and the mind. You will remember that Paul was chained to a Roman soldier. He was guarded day and night. In like manner, the peace of God stands guard over us, over the two areas that create worry: The heart and our wrong feeling, and our mind, our wrong thinking.

When we give our hearts to Christ in salvation, we experience peace with God. But the peace of God takes us a step further into His blessings. This does not mean the absence of trials on the outside, but it does give us a quiet confidence on the inside, regardless of the circumstances we face and the people we are dealing with.

The first condition for the secure mind and victory over worry is right praying. Then there’s right thinking. Peace involves both the heart and the mind. Wrong thinking leads to wrong feeling, and before long, the heart and the mind are pulled apart and we become strangled by worry. We must realize that our thoughts are real and powerful to us. Even though we can’t see them, we can’t weigh them or measure them, they’re there nonetheless.

Paul spells out in detail the things we ought to be thinking about as Christians. A survey on worry conducted many years ago by a Dr. Robert Calvert indicated that only

8% of the things people worried about were actually legitimate matters of concern. The other 92% were either imaginary—they never happened—or involved matters over which the people had no control anyway. “Whatever is honest and just” means “right and worthy of respect.” There are many things that are not respectable. These are things that Christians have no need to worry about or be looking at. It does not mean that we should hide our heads in the sand and avoid anything we think is unpleasant or distasteful, but it does mean that we should not focus our attention on dishonorable things. “Whatever is pure, lovely and good report.” “Pure” probably refers to moral purity, since the people then, as now, had the same temptations we do to sexual impurity. The believer must maintain high and noble thoughts, not the base thoughts of this world. “Whatever possesses virtue and praise.” If it has virtue, it will motivate us to do better. If it has praise, it is worth commending to others. No Christian can afford to waste mindpower on thoughts that ultimately tear him down or will tear others down if those thoughts were shared.

If you compare this list to David’s description of the Word of God in Psalm 19, you’ll see a parallel. The Christian who fills his heart and mind with God’s will has a built-in radar for detecting wrong thoughts. Right thinking is the result of daily meditation on the Word of God.

Paul’s attitude toward both the church and individuals is something each of us can emulate today. As we leave church today, ask yourselves: What can I do in our present circumstances to help others? Is there an elderly neighbor we need to check on? Is there someone caring for elderly parents or children who needs a break? Is there someone that we should share God’s Word with? The choice is ours.

Amen.