

Trinity United Methodist Church

October 11, 2020

Laity Sunday

“Guarding Our Hearts and Minds”

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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.

Message

Would you pray with me? Our Father, we thank you for your Word, and for the eternal truths that guide us each, day by day. We thank you most of all for the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and the sureness of His presence. Teach us how to turn unto you so that your thoughts may be our thoughts and your ways, our ways. Amen.

Good morning. I'm privileged and honored to be here today as your Lay Leader.

Recently I got an e-mail from a friend of mine living in another state. He wrote: “Everything just feels so uncertain to me. My mind often jumps to worst-case scenarios. I have no control over this pandemic, no control over who visits my parents, no control

over whether a loved one will contract COVID-19, no control over the lockdown in my city, no control over whether another recession is on the horizon. I worry. I'm a Christian, and I'm worried. And what, if anything, can I do about it?"

Perhaps you have been dealing with some of the same thoughts and worries. I think most of us have, to one degree or another.

It may seem strange that the letter in which Paul writes the most about peace, joy, and rejoicing, is Philippians, since when he wrote it, he was in prison. He didn't even know whether he would be set free or if he would be put to death. But it is in the midst of this terribly difficult and uncertain situation that Paul writes about discovering the secret of peace and joy in Christ Jesus.

A few verses beyond what was read this morning, Paul writes: "I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Paul has found a source of happiness that will never fail. It consists of an ongoing relationship with the risen Christ, who has already gone through the lowest point of the human condition. Rooted in Christ's life, Paul experiences a joy that nothing can take away. Whether he lives or dies, whether others shower him with praise or contempt, all is the same to him when it is seen from the standpoint of his relationship with Jesus Christ.

And that kind of God-given peace and joy does not make natural sense. It truly and really is a gift from God. You know, the Bible tells us that God isn't indifferent about the details of our lives. God knows each one of us personally. God cares about us personally and deeply, and nothing is out of God's control.

Now, humanly speaking, my joy or happiness or contentment depends on my circumstances. I am happy when I am surrounded by my friends, my wife, and my future looks bright. But if my happiness depended solely on outward circumstances, it would be impossible to "rejoice in the Lord always," because no matter what, in this life, we all go through dark valleys and exhilarating mountaintops. We all have problems. We all have difficulties. But there is a peace of God which transcends all understanding, which is available to us no matter the circumstances of our lives.

And the word for this kind of peace shows up nearly 100 times in the New Testament. And it has its roots in the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is used a lot in the Old Testament. And what *peace* and *shalom* mean is more than the absence of violence or trouble, although they can mean that. Both words signify the kind of well-being that comes from a deep relationship with God. The kind of wholeness that comes from having the image of God, once shattered by sin, restored in those who believe.

I once heard a speaker say that the difference between having peace with God and experiencing the peace of God is the difference between Jesus Christ being just our savior and Jesus Christ being our Lord, as well. Having the peace of God which transcends all understanding is a free gift that we learn to cultivate by bringing everything to God in prayer with thanksgiving. It really is, my friends, a choice that we make.

John Wesley used to say that a sour Christian is a sad thing, indeed. When Paul's famous, "Rejoice in the Lord *always*" arrived at the church in Philippi, it wasn't to an untroubled group that that the scroll was read out loud. The Philippians were troubled by external threats and internal strife. They were happy to get a note from Paul, but they might have thought to themselves, "*Rejoice always? Really? Do you know what kind of day I've had?*" But it turns out that Paul *does* know. It's no accident that he talks so much about his own hardships in the beginning of the letter. He offers himself as an example of suffering to the Philippians. He's imprisoned and has enemies all over the place. But Paul tells them that his response to all this is: "I rejoice." And his reason for this joy is: **Jesus Christ**.

"Rejoice in the Lord," says Paul, because prosperity and happy times and the other potential reasons for rejoicing can't be counted on to continue always. When our concerns have been left in God's loving care, the peace of God that is beyond comprehension will guard and protect our hearts and our minds. We can have security knowing that God is caring for us, and we can have sanity when we replace worry with faith and with prayer.

The prophet Isaiah knew God's peace when he wrote in Isaiah chapter 26, verses 3-4: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in You." "Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord Himself, is the Rock eternal."

In verse 8 of Philippians chapter 4, Paul writes: "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." There is sanity right here. Trusting in God includes giving our troubles and fears to God and then allowing the Holy Spirit to direct our hearts and our minds. To guard our hearts and our minds by thinking about good things rather than obsessing about worries.

And Paul not only urges the Philippians and us to think about good things, he urges us to put these good things into practice. "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put it into practice."

We are in the midst of this COVID-19 pandemic, and peace doesn't mean that we ignore the risks of our situation. Peace isn't saying, "Oh, everything will be fine." Peace

doesn't mean we shouldn't take precautions for our safety and the safety of others. Peace is acknowledging that the present circumstances may be bad, but we have the opportunity to live unafraid because of a hope that isn't based on wearing a mask or the development of a vaccine, but a hope that rests in a relationship with the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

There once was a king who offered a prize to the artist who could paint the best picture of peace. The picture that the king picked looked like this, and imagine this in your mind: The mountains were bare and rocky. Above them was an angry sky from which rain fell and lightning thundered. Down the side of the mountain was a massive rushing waterfall. Behind the waterfall, a tiny bush grew out of a crack in the rock. In the bush, a mother bird had built her nest. There in the midst of the rushing, angry water sat the mother bird on her nest in perfect peace. Someone asked the king, "Why did you choose this picture?" "Because," explained the king, "peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart."

This is the real, true meaning of peace. Paul doesn't just simply tell the Philippians to stop worrying. He gives them the antidote, and that antidote is prayer. In any and every situation, we can bring our requests, our needs, our problems to God in prayer, and leave them with God, in God's capable hands. God cares for you and me, and God cares about you and me.

Peter understood this when he wrote, "Cast all of your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." Have you handed over your ownership of your life to the lordship of Jesus Christ? Do you trust God with your cares, your troubles, your hardships, your anxiety? Every time you start to feel worried and anxious, make the conscious decision to pray about whatever is bothering you and hand the situation over to God. And most of all, be thankful. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Praise God. Amen.