

Have No Anxiety

As Paul moves toward the end of his letter to his friends at Philippi, he has some very specific advice and recommendations for them about living in the way of Jesus. At first glance, some of this counsel may seem disjointed, separate pearls of wisdom, at best, strung together only by Paul's stream of consciousness. But in fact, these seemingly disparate lessons from Paul flow from and cohere into a beautiful understanding of the nature of Christ Jesus and how engaging in a true imitation of Christ can radically alter our lives for the better.

Our first clue that these verses are more than a random collection of advice comes in the first word of the first verse: "therefore." It's a pretty common device of Paul's letter writing that he'll weave several fairly complex arguments together in a final statement and the word "therefore" almost always begins his summing up. It makes us look back to what he has said before and then draws us forward. A quick review is in order. Paul begins the letter with a prayer for the Philippians; a prayer that they will truly learn to live in the overflowing love of Jesus, recognizing and treasuring the things of ultimate importance in life, and gently extending that love and lifestyle to all around them. Then, Paul reminded his friends that living in this world, even in the way of Jesus, is never easy but that through our difficulties we can learn in an even deeper way what God's love can mean in our lives and in our impact on others. As our great exemplar, Paul held up Jesus, who put God's will and our good before his own. As we become willing to live like Jesus, Paul wrote, as we open our lives to God's will as he did, so shall God redeem our lives, making us building blocks of the Beloved Community, the restoration of God's great and loving plan for Creation. Living in God's will through the faith in God that is a gift from God that, according to Paul, is the great prize for which he has been willing to press on, regardless of setbacks and trials. In the last verses of chapter three, he writes, "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself."

"Therefore," because of all this, Paul writes to his dear, dear friends, "stand firm in the Lord in this way," resist the troubles of your lives in the way I have told you and in putting to use the following lessons. First, Paul addresses himself specifically to two women whom we must assume are among the leaders of the church – and, incidentally, he mentions Euodia and Synteche before he mentions Clement, who, according to ancient tradition, went on to become the third Pope, so clearly Paul suffered from no illusions about who was going to really run churches, regardless of what some men might say. He urges Euodia and Synteche "to be of the same mind in the Lord," recalling his introduction in chapter two to the great hymn of Christ: "Have this same mind in you which was in Christ Jesus..." Once again, Paul's primary admonition is that believers should put God's will before their own and adopt the attitude of Jesus, who came to serve rather than to be served.

Paul then returns his focus to the church at Philippi as a whole. In an oft-quoted verse, and one I imagine many of us learned first in the song we sang earlier, he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Now, at first blush, this may seem like pretty sappy, unrealistic advice. How many of you remember Bobby McFerrin's big hit from the late 80s, "Don't Worry, Be Happy"? Well, that's not what Paul is saying. Paul is not suggesting that everything in life is going to be cause for rejoicing. He knows better. What he says is, "Rejoice *in the Lord* always." As he's reminded the Philippians earlier in the letter, he knows what it is to

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endure hardship and he finds nothing to recommend in the experience in and of itself. He'd just as soon depart and be with the Lord, remember. But when he sees how Jesus can be glorified in his suffering, when he sees how important it is for his friends for him to persevere, then he is willing to endure and he regards all else as nothing – not the things he's lost, not the pain and loneliness he's suffered, nothing is as important as giving glory to the Lord. The Australian theologian William Loader puts it well: "Paul's "always" is not a quantitative assertion of the kind that implies joy in every moment. Joy is never alone. Its companions are pain and fear. At times Paul's letters display more of some than the other. Paul's sense of joy is not the absence of pain or fear, but the presence of Christ, in whom he places his hope and trust."

Paul's imperative, "Rejoice in the Lord always," reminds us that our lives are now grounded in the grace of God, the love of Christ Jesus and the companionship of the Holy Spirit and that grounding is there every day and in every situation. It is also a reminder that no matter what our immediate emotional reaction to a situation may be, we can still move through an act of will to a positive outlook on that situation. We are called to do this not only as individuals but also collectively, "to be of the same mind," as Paul urged Euodia and Synteché. This is important not only for our own quality of life but also for the witness which it presents to others. Debra Dean Murphy writes in her commentary on this passage, "A life of joy is the Church's common witness, born of a way of seeing the world in which free markets don't determine our security or our future and in which anger—God's or our own—never has the last word." Isn't it good to remember that we are ultimately kept by something far greater than the crumbling economy or anger over the divisive political campaign?

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Paul writes, referring back to his prayer for the Philippians at the opening of the letter. Do you remember how he prayed that the Christians in Philippi would never be the reason for others to stumble? That's another good thing for us to remember as our nation and community seem to be more and more deeply divided by political questions. I know it's a good admonition for me – I'm not proud of some of the angry responses that I've given to people over politics in recent days. I hope all of you have managed to retain the gentleness I have lacked. Bad traffic, rudeness, willful ignorance or incompetence – all of these things are destructive of the gentleness I seek in my life and perhaps they are for you, too.

But Paul does have good news for any of us who are struggling to keep gentleness in the forefront of our response to the world: the Lord is near. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes this phrase in what was probably its original Aramaic, "marana tha." It can be translated either as a statement, "the Lord comes" or "the Lord is near," or as a petition, "come, Lord," and was likely one of the earliest prayers of the Palestinian church. In its Greek form and as a petition, it is also found in the next to last verse of our Bible, Revelation 22:20, "The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" But here it is best understood as a statement and an encouragement. We are able to rejoice in the Lord and to manifest gentleness because the Lord is near, because the Lord, in fact, inhabits our very hearts. The Kingdom, indeed, is within us. We need not rely on our own strength of will or our own virtue to stand firm in the Lord and to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus, for God waits for us to open ourselves to the will of God and to allow the Holy Spirit to work through us.

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I dismissed Bobby McFerrin's Meher Baba-inspired "Don't Worry, Be Happy" philosophy, but some of the lyrics of his song do resonate with Paul. "In every life we have some trouble/When you worry you make it double." "Do not worry about anything," Paul writes. Paul certainly knew what many ancient civilizations included in their philosophy; excess worry kills the human spirit. I learned this week that the Germanic root of the word "worry" means "to strangle." I also learned that in some ancient hieroglyphics, the pictograph for "worry" depicts a wolf sinking his teeth into a man's neck. I'd call that a fairly universal metaphor. Paul gives us a much more practical solution to worry than a simplistic "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Listen to the paraphrase of Eugene Peterson's The Message: "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life." St. John Chrysostom, the Fourth Century archbishop of Constantinople, whose great preaching ability earned him the name "golden mouth" (Χρυσόστομος), put it this way: "Here is a medicine to relieve grief and every bad circumstance and every pain. What is it? To pray and to give thanks in everything."

Chrysostom continues, "God does not wish that a prayer be merely a petition but a thanksgiving for what we have received.... How can one make petitions for the future without a thankful acknowledgment of past things?" I will always remember something that I learned from Dr. Harold Songer when I was in seminary; that Paul is only truly intelligible when you remember that he saw everything through the lens of his experience of the Living Christ on the Damascus Road. Paul's gratitude for how Jesus changed his life enabled him to give thanks in every situation. Here, he encourages the Philippians, and by extension, us, to share with him in that thanksgiving. Our own experience of salvation, redemption, healing, freedom, can power our thanksgivings and help move us from worry to peace.

When, like Paul, we remember the blessing of the presence of God in our lives, we can experience that peace of God that passes all understanding. As Dr. Songer also used to say, "It's easy to be laid back when you've got something to lean on." There's a story popular among preachers to illustrate this concept. An airplane hits dangerous and frightening turbulence. Everyone on the flight tightens their seat belts and feels extreme anxiety except for one little girl who continues calmly playing with her doll, unconcerned about the situation. A woman sitting next to her asks: "Aren't you afraid?" The little girl answers: "No, my daddy is the pilot and he knows I am on board." The Creator of All, who is both our Father and our Mother, is the ultimate pilot of the universe and he knows that we are on board. God knows and cares, loves us as beloved children and watches over us.

"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." Sometimes, I have to honestly wonder if Paul knew how hard this final piece of advice would be to implement in the 21st Century. I don't watch a lot of television anyway and the radio station I listen to most is a public radio station, so I hear almost all music there, but I've discovered that I can hardly bear to listen to or watch the news or any public affairs program any more. It's not that I don't want to be informed, you understand, but after reading the morning paper, I just don't feel that I need to be exposed any

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farther to bad economic news I can't do anything about or the rantings of partisan political animals of either party. When the current presidential campaign began, I was pleased. I didn't agree with everything either candidate espoused but, I thought, here were two honorable men, who had shown themselves more interested in ideas and solutions than in political "business as usual." I cannot tell you how disappointed I am in both candidates, insofar as they have engaged in *ad hominem* arguments rather than substance, in their advisors for pushing them in this direction, and most deeply in the partisans on both sides who have sunk to the level of outright mudslinging. To any Christian who has helped spread an unsubstantiated rumor by word of mouth or e-mail, and I count myself in this number, I say, "shame on you." Shame on me. This is hardly what Paul meant when he said, "think about these things," the things of excellence and purity and justice and honor and truth.

As William Loader points out, this is not simply Paul's precursor to Norman Vincent Peale's "Power of Positive Thinking." Loader writes, "It is about filling one's mind with what Paul sees as the signs of God's life - not so that we will feel good, but because this is another way of filling oneself with God's life and so allowing God's life to flow through us to the world around us. This kind of grounded spirituality lies behind Paul's understanding of peace and, ultimately, also of joy." We can rejoice in God because as we allow ourselves to be in tune with the good that God has created and still creates in our world, with the Good News of Christ Jesus, then we participate in the good of creation and it infuses our lives. This is not about closing our eyes to the problems around us but it is about focusing on potential solutions and not just the problems. It would be a good discipline for each of us to look for at least one praiseworthy thing in the world around us every day and to be sure every day to do at least one thing that makes life just a little easier for someone else. There's a good deal to be said for some pop culture slogans. Think for example of "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade," and "Practice random acts of kindness."

So, I am glad to come to this sacred place on this Sabbath morning to reorient my thinking. I find a deep rejoicing in singing praises to the God of peace, to Jesus who bears my griefs and brings me salvation full and free, regardless of my failures and my weaknesses. In Christ Jesus, we all find love and forgiveness and in Christ Jesus we all find the strength to rejoice, to go gently and to love others as God would have us do. Let us have the same mind in us which was in Christ Jesus, who laid aside everything we might think was of value in order to do the will of our Creator, to teach God's love and to suffer and die so that all might be healed. And, lest we forget that sacrifice, let us come to the table of the Lord, to celebrate the beauty of Him who served bread and wine to the children of Adam and Eve and to encourage us on our way to becoming the beautiful Bride, the beautiful, beautiful Body of Christ. Amen.