

THINK ON THESE THINGS
Philippians 4:1-9

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on October 11, 2020, the Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic and the sermon was preached to an empty sanctuary for livestreaming.

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

I.

Friday morning brought me some poignant events and conversations in quick succession.

- I got up early, wrote and recorded a devotional for Tuesday about the joy of reading I had experienced the day before, and then posted it on our website without technological incident.
- I put in an early morning call to Whitney Fauntleroy and reached her, hearing her voice for the first time in two weeks, and deriving hope from the fact that her voice sounded like the voice I had heard weeks earlier, prior to the onset of pain and surgery. Among the things she addressed was deep gratitude for all the prayers and support she has received from us her church.
- A few minutes later I received a call from Debbie Wells with the news that her husband Kent had passed away a few minutes before, drawing to a peaceful close his fourteen-year life with multiple myeloma, an extraordinary period of time to have lived with this disease, and a period which allowed him to see both sons graduate, begin their careers, marry, and in one case provide grandchildren. Along the way he and Debbie had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to benefit research into the disease whose onset ultimately took him home.
- I then participated in a weekly Zoom call with the Faith and Politics Institute as we seek to chart a future that honors and extends the legacy of Representative John Lewis who has been the driving force of the organization for decades.

All this was before lunch.

I fixed a sandwich, took long walk, sat in front of my computer and began to think of the sermons and worship that will originate from this sanctuary over the next few weeks.

- Today I will speak a word from the Apostle Paul to our national division.

- Next week, Jacob will preach as we welcome back for the first time since March 8, up to twenty-five worshippers from the congregation at large who may begin signing up on the website tomorrow morning. A limited, but not insignificant, re-opening.
- On October 25, I will preach on “Stewardship in a Time of Coronavirus.”
- On November 1, I plan to say something – likely from the Book of Samuel – to prepare us for our national election two days later.
- On November 8, we will remember with music and readings those who have given their lives in service to our nation; and I will seek through brief homily and prayer to say something about wherever we are at the time, after the casting, if not the counting of votes is complete.

Let us hear our Prayer of Illumination:

*Lord Jesus, think on me, nor let me go astray;
through darkness and perplexity, point Thou the heav'nly way.*

II.

Paul knew the congregation at Philippi well. He had founded it and had maintained a warm and vibrant relationship with its members after he left. But an issue of division had arisen within the congregation, and Paul was moved to write them a letter concerning the challenges they faced.

We cannot tell from the letter what the division concerned. But central to it were two leaders of the congregation, women named Euodia and Syntyche. Paul addresses them by name in the letter which he knows will be read to the congregation during worship with Euodia and Syntyche presumably present.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche [Paul writes] to be of the same mind in the Lord.

He continues:

...I ask you also, my loyal Syzgas, help these women, for they have struggled side-by-side with 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.

In addressing the congregation that he, Euodia and Syntyche love, Paul invokes what they have shared in the past:

- *Be of the same mind in the Lord* [he implores] – unified around issues that matter, issues that are crucial to our life as a congregation, beliefs and practices that are crucial to our collective identity as Christians in this Greco-Roman culture in which we are a minority. *Be of the same mind in the Lord.*
- Second, Paul says, remember that you *have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, all of whose names are written in the book of life.*

Paul is thus asking Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, their co-workers and every member of the congregation to remember their shared beliefs and their shared community as part of healing the division that has begun to tear at the fabric of their life together. By reading the letter in worship, by referring directly to the two leaders at the heart of the conflict, Paul is injecting honesty into the church conversations and calling on the whole

congregation to be involved in its healing. He is neither papering over their differences nor leaving their resolution to a handful of sequestered leaders.

**

Paul then invokes pathway to effect this healing. He calls on every member of the community to use their hearts and minds, to feel and to think.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice...The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Rejoicing. Prayer. Supplication. Deep and profound matters of the heart, expressed within the community.

Then Paul concludes:

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.

Truth. Honor. Justice. Excellence. Paul is calling on the Philippians to use their *minds* and *think* on these things.

Thus, healing divisions, recovering relationships involve both heart and mind. *The peace of God...will stand sentinel over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*, Paul says.

III.

Moving from the church in the first century to our country the twenty-first century, most of us acknowledge it is a challenge to have a shared sense of rejoicing in our land today.

- It has been decades since racial divisions are as raw as they are now.
- A sitting governor is sufficiently threatened by a vigilante group that thirteen are arrested prior to a planned kidnapping.
- Another contentious Supreme Court hearing opens tomorrow.
- Many celebrate policies and appointments that have occurred over the last four years, many others grieve them; which is, of course, why we have elections in the first place.
- Our political culture is divided and nearly everyone has made up their mind how they are going to vote.
- Our government seems unable to act on anything of legislative significance; and with the two oldest candidates running for President, one of whom is ill with COVID 19, no one can really answer, or is much willing to address, what happens if a candidate dies before the election, or if the winner dies after the election but before the inauguration.
- If we have ventured out of our homes to Costco or Harris Teeter or even the patio of our favorite restaurant, we may have encountered the scene of an angry potential diner storming off and cursing

when told by a trembling young waiter he has to wear a mask to be seated; and somehow the whole scene was not the appetizer we had ordered.

- And who among those of us my age or older have found ourselves less and less inclined to take refuge in what we have been saying for more than a year: “Well, it’s not as bad as the summer of 1968?”

Historian Jill Lepore has surveyed novels written during pandemics and concludes:

The plague novel is the place where all human beings abandon all other human beings. Unlike other species of apocalyptic fiction, where the enemy can be chemicals or volcanoes or earthquakes or alien invaders, the enemy here is *other humans*: the *touch* of others humans, the *breath* of other humans, and very often – in the competition for diminishing resources – the *mere existence* of other humans.¹

It is hard to rejoice when we need the arms of another human being at the precise time we can neither *give* nor *receive* such arms.

**

And yet, if we allow the words Paul spoke to the early church speak to our day and time, Paul calls us to *rejoice*. What on earth can he mean? Has he no accurate sense of the appropriate time to issue such a call?

It is worth noting that in issuing his call, Paul uses the language of worship:

- Rejoicing
- Prayer
- Supplication
- Thanksgiving.

These are not nouns found in politics or on the battlefield, in the classroom or the laboratory. Paul’s language is the language of worship. And even when it is not safe for all of us to gather for worship, the language Paul uses describes worship we can experience. No matter what is going on in our world, our nation, our lives:

- We *can* express joy, for small or great things, for things unfathomably deep or as seemingly shallow as a wading pool.
- We *can* pray...about anything. Anything.
- We can entreat God on behalf of ourselves, others, our nation and world.
- We can give thanks to God, for safety we have, for security we trust, for healing we have come to know.

Notice as well Paul’s use of a crucial adverb: “Always.” “Rejoice in the Lord *always*.”

- Not just when we are happy with the fate or direction of our country.
- Not just when our politics is in sync with our faith and both seem to be in sync with where our nation is going.

¹ Jill Lepore, “What Our Contagion Fables Are Really About,” *The New Yorker* 3/30/20.

- Not just when we can hug someone safely.

No, Paul says: *Rejoice in the Lord, always...in everything...*

It is tragic when we allow the state of the nation, the state of our culture, to thwart our prayer life. Conversely, if we only pray when our candidate steps to the podium with a victory speech, how deep can our prayer be?

Rejoice in the Lord...always...Paul says. Always...in everything.

**

While Paul is deeply appreciative of the matters of the *heart*, he speaks with equal seriousness of the life of the mind. He draws from the political and philosophical language of his day – the language of politics – to speak to the church.² Listen to the adjectives he uses to implore the Philippians to think:

- Whatever is *true*
- Whatever is *honorable*
- Whatever is *just*
- Whatever is *pure*
- Whatever is *pleasing*
- Whatever is *commendable*
- Whatever is *excellent*
- Whatever is *worthy of praise* –

Think on these things. Think on these things. Think!

**

Just as Paul draws on the language of the political culture to speak to the church, we may in turn speak his words back into the political culture from which they came.

In a recent column, philosopher Pico Iyer sought to answer the question: “What is the best reason to go to college?” His answer: “The same as it ever was: To learn that the world is more than the issues that divide us.”

He spoke of traveling with the Dalai Lama a year before the pandemic broke out. Iyer says:

I heard [the Dalai Lama] say often that after watching the planet up close...for...79 years, he felt the world was suffering through an “emotional crisis.” The cure, [the Dalai Lama] said, was “emotional disarmament.” What he meant by the striking phrase was that we can see beyond panic and rage and confusion only by using our *minds*...[particularly] that part of the mind that doesn’t deal in binaries. Emotional disarmament might prove even more feasible than the nuclear type, insofar as most of us can reform our minds more easily than we can move a huge and intractable government. By opening our minds, we begin to change the world.

The Dalai Lama concludes:

We alone among the animals enjoy reasoning minds, the capacity to see beyond reflex.³

² Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 72-74.

³ Pico Iyer, “The Best Reason to Go to College,” *The New York Times* 9/6/20.

- Whatever is *true*
- Whatever is *honorable*
- Whatever is *just*
- Whatever is *pure*
- Whatever is *pleasing*
- Whatever is *commendable*
- Whatever is *excellent*
- Whatever is *worthy of praise* –

Think on these things, Paul writes. Think.

**

Because we only have the letters that Paul writes – and not the answers back to them – we don't know the outcome of the division in the church at Philippi. I for one cannot help but imagine that once Euodia and Syntyche and Clement and all the others recovered their sense of rejoicing and began to use – once again – their “reasoning minds,” the outcome bode well and the Gospel continued its spread.

May we in our nation recover our sense of rejoicing and use, once again, our reasoning minds, that it will bode well with us.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA