

Philippians 4:1-9

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

"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."

It occurs to me that at first glance it might be easy to hear these words from Paul as an easy to follow guide to a happy, stress free life. It could almost read like an article in one of those Lifestyle magazines entitled "The Secret to Happiness.... in Three Easy Steps." Or, if Paul's words were set to music they might just sound like that old song by Bobby McFerrin. Do you remember (sing a bit) "[Don't Worry, Be Happy!](#)"

Paul says, "Do not worry about anything." And then he goes on to tell us in some detail how to think happy thoughts and for the big finish assures us that we just need to learn to be content with what we have.

Could it be that crusty old Paul is indulging the Philippians in a little bit of the Power of Positive Thinking? Maybe when we are in crisis all we need to do is to boost our optimism levels a bit and that will set us right in no time.

But that doesn't ring true does it? This kind of advice seems way too trite coming from Paul and it hardly holds true to the bedrock *power* of Gospel.

Now we *can* hear this kind of mindless Pop Psychology from the both from self-help books as well as the pulpit, but as those who follow Christ we have to ask ourselves where this kind of thinking intersects with Jesus and what he says it means to follow him. After all, Jesus says "Pick up your cross and follow me." Don't worry, be happy might work pretty well until hard steel hits soft human flesh.

And when our world feels like it is crumbling around us "don't worry, be happy" just won't cut it. The global economy is crashing and your pension has been eliminated? Don't worry, be happy!" Your mother has just been diagnosed with cancer? Don't worry, be happy!" You're losing your job....you get my point.

But I think Paul is getting at something far different than a trite solution to difficult circumstances. Because, you see, Paul is writing to the Church in Philippi while he is imprisoned in Rome. Paul knows a little something about serious adversity. At this point he is only under house arrest, but he is pretty clear that things are not going well for him and in fact we know that he died from beheading within a year of writing this letter.¹

The tenor of Paul's letter set against the danger of his own circumstances invites us to look deeper into his encouraging words. I believe that we can mine them for their power to bring us hope in the midst of our own troubling times.

I am reminded of how Jesus teaches us with similar sayings.

During the Sermon on the mount Jesus said, "Do not be worried about your life" and went on to say, "Who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?" and finally "Do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

It seems that Paul and Jesus are talking about something far greater than simply denying our troubles. I think they are speaking to a feeling that goes far beyond mere happiness.

After all, I am "happy" when my cats leave their hairballs on the tile instead of the carpet. I am "really happy" if I see them first instead of stepping in them in the dark.

Happiness also describes that wonderful feeling when we get a parking place close to front of the store or restaurant. And I am very, very happy when I find a great pair of shoes on sale at DSW!

Happiness is great; don't get me wrong, I like *happiness!* But happiness is a transitory and surface feeling and as such it is easily transferred into unhappiness. I am *unhappy* to step in a hairball on the carpet, in the dark, first thing in the morning.

But my feelings about hairballs, parking spaces or shoe sales will not significantly affect the long term quality of my life...you get my drift?

Mere happiness is not deep enough; it is not significant enough to provide an anchor in those times when life threatens to overwhelm us. It does not have the depth to provide an unshakable foundation in the midst of life's most unsettling times.

¹ Fred Craddock, "Philippians" in *Interpretation Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*.

What Paul and Jesus are describing as they point us away from worry is so much more substantial than that. What they are describing my friends is JOY. Joy is what is promised to those who love and follow God. Both in our individual lives and as a faith community, God's Joy is what liberates us from unceasing worry and crippling anxiety.

Now many people do not associate faith with the idea of Joy. Many Christians have a tendency to think that deep, somber sobriety is the only appropriate stance before God in life or in worship---they suspect joy of being trivial or lacking in dignity. Or worse, if our faith isn't making us feel guilty then we must not be doing it right!

And yet others will welcome Paul's words as a confirmation that the church only exists to make people feel good. I think Paul would feel very uncomfortable with both of these groups.

Paul asks us to transcend both of these notions and understand that Joy *is* God's promise that no matter how far down life takes us, no matter how bad the economy or no matter how daunting our loss, we have a deep foundational Truth into which we can sink our hope and our faith. Joy is ours when at last we put away our unrelenting fears and trust that God is really with us.

The joy we find in trusting God does not come and go with the nature of our present circumstances, but it is a constant, solid rock on which we can stand when everything else we trust in seems to be crumbling. "Stand firm in the Lord," Paul tells us.

Abundant Life and Joy are synonymous in God's world; Jesus says, "I came that you might have life and might have it more abundantly" this is God's promise of Joy. And Joy is the very substance at the heart of the "peace that passes all understanding."

The peace that passes all understanding does not refer to the absence of conflict or hardship. As a matter of fact this joyous peace can rise to its peak when our lives are under the most stress.

This is what Paul is talking about; this is what Jesus teaches us again and again. And the grace of this sweet peace and joy is available to each and every one of us, each and every day. We do not have to be "good enough" or "holy enough" or rich enough" or any of the "enough's" that the world tells us we need to know mere happiness.

Listen to Paul this morning. Paul reminds us that the "secret" is in simply trusting that God is near. This can be harder to do than it sounds! But in my own life I have found that the first key to unlocking joy is to trust that in any and all circumstances God is near and that God has not and will not ever abandon us.

No where do we hear that we just ignore the problems in our lives. Paul counsels us to turn the problems over to God in prayer. Paul does not think that prayer is magical and will "fix" what is wrong in our lives.

But prayer can be that anchor that ties us to something strong and solid when the tumult of life is making us feel tossed about and lost at sea. When we take our fears and anxieties in our lives and give them to God, our eyes are opened. We no longer feel overwhelmed. It is then that we gain the presence of heart and mind to take action.

Instead of feeling hopeless and helpless we are able to see beyond our present circumstances and move from simply trying to survive to claiming a new stake for a joyful future—no matter what.

And finally, with the gift of this peace we will come to worship on Sundays and *see* that we are not alone in our struggles. Paul exhorts us to a deep sense of unity as a community of faith.

When we act out of the commitment that we are truly here for one another, then we indeed become a community of friends and family and so we walk with one another through the turbulence that life sometimes brings. Joy is ours to both receive and share.

So good people of St. Stephen's, "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." Amen.

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