

I

Michelangelo was one of the greatest artists of the Italian renaissance. To this very day, his paintings and sculptures adorn churches and museums all over Europe, and perhaps no sculpture in the world is more famous than his rendering of King David of biblical fame, which stands proudly in the Academia Gallery in Florence, Italy.

Whenever Michelangelo set out to create a new sculpture, he always insisted on picking out the piece of marble himself. He once famously said that the finished piece was always already inside the marble – his job was only to cut away the excess to reveal the beauty already inside.

Part of what made Michelangelo an exceptional sculptor was his dual vision – his God-given ability to look at a piece of rock and see not only what was, but also what could be. And that kind of vision is at the heart of our reading today from the Book of Philippians.

II

Philippians isn't a book in the traditional sense, but rather a letter, written in the first century by a man named Paul and addressed to a group of Christians living in a Roman colony called Philippi.

Paul was the most prolific writer, preacher, and theologian of the first century. Of the 27 books that make up our New Testament, about half were

either written by Paul or attributed to him.

Paul's fervent proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ often got him into trouble with the authorities. On more than one occasion, he was arrested, beaten, and incarcerated on made-up charges, and the letter we're reading this morning was composed from behind bars. The Roman empire didn't worry itself too much with care and comfort of prisoners, and sometimes, Roman jails were really just open stockades, without any kind of sanitary facilities. Prisoners were dependent on friends and family on the "outside" for even the most basic of human necessities, and it appears that some of Paul's friends in the Roman colony of Philippi had learned of his incarceration and sent him food, clothes, medicine, and some much needed encouragement

Much of Paul's letter to the Philippians, then, reads like a thank you letter, for that's what it is. But Paul also used the occasion to remind the Philippians about the good news of Jesus Christ and God's amazing grace.

And so with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Philippians, chapter 4, *verses 4 through 9*.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

III

When Paul sat down to write these words, he wasn't sitting at a nice desk in a big leather chair with a hot cup of coffee at his side. He was sitting in a Roman jail, or more likely, simply a Roman pit. I don't imagine when Paul looked around, he saw much that was pure, or pleasing, or honorable, or worthy of praise within his immediate field of view.

So how could Paul make such a claim? How could Paul, given his horrific circumstances, exhort the Philippians to focus on that which is honorable, just, pure, and pleasing? Was this just an exercise in the power of positive thinking? Or was it something more?

Earlier this morning, we heard the account of the Day of Pentecost, which took place 50 days after Jesus' death and resurrection. Our attention is

captivated by the sound like a mighty rushing wind and the vision of something like tongues of fire resting on each of the disciples and their sudden ability to speak the good news of the gospel in all the languages of the then-known world. But it's easy to forget that just before that event, the sum total of Christians in the entire world could have easily fit inside this room.

It wasn't the power of positive thinking that suddenly granted them the ability to speak new languages. It wasn't just keeping on the sunny side, always on the sunny side, that enabled them to stand in marketplaces and before magistrates and kings and emperors and proclaim the good news of the gospel. It wasn't just their positive attitude that attracted thousands to their number that very day. It was the Spirit working in and through them.

IV

And here's the thing about you, my friend. The same Spirit that fell on the disciples that Pentecost Day is the same Spirit that is at work in and through you.

The same Spirit that enabled Paul, writing from a Roman pit, to implore the Philippians to focus on that which is good and pure and pleasing and worthy of praise – is at work in and through you.

Not because of anything you did, or anything you didn't do, not because of anything you said or didn't say, but because you belong to God, and there's

nothing that God wouldn't do for you, and nothing that God wouldn't give for you. You are God's beloved, and God has poured out God's Spirit upon you.

There is much in our world that is frightening and painful. Seeing with the vision of the Spirit does not mean that we ignore or dismiss pain. Seeing with the vision of the Spirit does not mean that we tell people to just buck up or keep on the sunny side.

Seeing with the Spirit means that God has given you the ability to see the world as it is, warts and all, but also the world as it could be. It means that you see the rock, and the crevices and the imperfections and the stains in the marble, but rather than focus on them, you focus on the beauty that God has hidden inside, just waiting for you to discover and share with the world.

V

That which we focus on often becomes our reality. That's a proverb that is popular among coaches and business leaders and organizational psychologists. That which we focus on often becomes our reality. So, for example, if you are a baseball player and when your turn comes to bat, you're focused on avoiding a strikeout, you're actually more likely to strike out, whereas if your mental focus is on just making contact with the baseball, you're more likely to make contact with the baseball. That which we focus upon often becomes our reality.

As pleased as Paul was with the Philippian church, he was well aware of the congregation's problems and challenges, too. At one point in the letter, he pauses to address a conflict between a certain Euodia and a certain Syntche that had apparently become so heated that word of it reached all the way into the depths of Paul's prison cell. Paul was all too aware that there is no such thing as a perfect congregation.

But Paul also knew that whatever we focus on often tends to become our reality. And so he exhorted the Philippian Christians to focus on that which was true and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise.

Like every institution on the planet, our church has been through quite a storm over the past few years. So let us look at ourselves with the vision of the Spirit this Pentecost Day. Let us look at what is. Let us see the rock as it is. Let us behold the imperfections. Let us note the discolorations. Let us observe the rough places.

But let us also see with the vision of the Spirit. Let us see what could be. Let us see that which is true, and honorable, and just. Let us focus upon that which is pure, and pleasing, and commendable, and excellent and worthy of praise. Let us keep on doing the things that we have learned and received and heard and seen in the Spirit, and the God of peace will be with us, for that which we focus upon tends to become our reality.

Thanks be to God. Amen.