

## I

From time to time, people send me funny bloopers from church bulletins and newsletters. For example, one entry in a church newsletter, reporting on the previous week's guest preacher, said this: "We had the privilege of hearing a good sermon last while our pastor was away."

Another favorite from a church marquee sign said simply this, "Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help."

## II

Last week, we launched a sermon series called, "The Enemies of Gratitude." As people of faith, we believe that gratitude is more than just good manners or the recognition of being in someone's debt.

Gratitude, theologically understood, is the recognition that all that we have, all that we are, and all that we will be, is a gift from a good and gracious and exceedingly generous God.

For us as Christians, when we look at the cross, we are reminded once again of the height and depth and breadth of God's love for us. We are reminded that in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, God did for us what we could have never done for ourselves. We are reminded that we were once cut off from God and without hope, but now we have been adopted by God and made co-heirs with Christ, and there is nothing that can ever take that away.

For we who follow Jesus Christ, gratitude is the key to unlocking the kind of peace that Jesus talked about when he told his disciples on the night before his arrest and betrayal, "My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives, so do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

For the next few Sundays, we're going to be talking about this kind of gratitude, as well as some of the enemies of gratitude, the habits and practices that so often rob us of the peace and joy that gratitude brings.

Last week, we read from the story of the Exodus, and we talked about the enemy of gratitude called nostalgia – the habit of being so focused on a longing for the past that we ignore or miss or just take for granted the miracles that God is doing in the here and now.

Today, we turn to another enemy of gratitude. Rather than focusing on the past, this enemy deals with the future. And in order to illustrate this particular enemy, we turn to words from the Apostle Paul, from his letter to the Philippians.

## III

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.

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. I don't imagine that when he contemplated his immediate future, the picture he saw in his mind's eye was a terribly bright one.

And yet he has the audacity to write to the Philippians, and to us, the Athenians, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to God."

#### IV

Years ago, a catchy song rocketed to the top of the charts. And the first line goes something like this.

"Here's a little song I wrote, you might want to sing it note for note, don't worry, be happy. In every life we have

some trouble, but when you worry you make it double. Don't worry. Be happy."

Is that what Paul is suggesting to the Philippians? Just hum a catchy little tune and everything will be OK? Don't worry, be happy?

Because let's be honest. It sounds like bad advice. Just a glance at the front page of the Sunday paper or a scroll through one's social media feed, and it's one thing after another after another about which to be worried.

And if you're facing something huge in your own life – if you're waiting on a test result from the doctor, or if you constantly keep coming to the end of the money before you come to the end of the month, or if you care for a child that is struggling, then there's good and sufficient reason to worry, and Paul's counsel sounds irritating, if not downright cruel.

How can Paul make such a claim? Nothing was going well, not for Paul, and not for his readers. The church was under assault from without and being torn apart by bitterness and division within. Just before today's passage, Paul has to call out two members of the Philippian church whose beef with each other has become so loud that apparently the sound of it has carried all the way into Paul's prison cell. Paul himself has been beaten and imprisoned and is facing the real prospect of being put to death.

And yet he writes, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Paul is not telling us to just think happy thoughts. Paul has seen the darkness of this world up close. Paul is just as overwhelmed by the evil that grips God's creation. The difference, though is were Paul puts his ultimate trust.

Paul does not put his ultimate trust in the Roman military or judicial system. He does not put his ultimate trust in his personal financial resources or social networks. He does not put his ultimate trust in some slogan or song that whispers happy platitudes in the middle of a world gone mad.

Rejoice in the Lord, he writes. Again, I will say, rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord.

My friend, you and I live in a culture that teaches us to put our ultimate trust in all kinds of things. But a confidence in temporal things will always be temporary.

You and I have an advantage that even Paul himself didn't have. We've read last page of the book. We know how the story ends. God wins. Despite all of the madness of this world, despite all of the pain and heartache and suffering all around us, and oftentimes within us, in the end, God wins.

This does not mean that we just whistle a happy little tune while we wait. This does not mean that we are exempt from working for peace and reconciliation and justice in our own lives and in the communities in which we live.

But we need not let worries about tomorrow rob us of gratitude for today. We need not let worry rob us of the peace that gratitude always brings with it. We do not know what tomorrow holds, but we who have been redeemed by Christ Jesus, we know the One who holds tomorrow.

## V

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, our ancestors in our faith set out to write a new catechism – a series of questions and answers designed to teach children and people new to the faith about the way of Jesus.

And for the very first question, they wrote this. What is your only comfort, in life and in death? What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

As they asked that question, they were living in a time not long after the bubonic plague had swept through much of Europe, resulting in catastrophic levels of death. By some estimates, it took nearly a full century for the economy to recover. At the same time, there were massive new leaps forward in economics and technology and in the ways that information was transmitted and stored. Our ancestors in faith were living through a season of incredible

upheaval in every aspect of life. They had good and sufficient reason to worry.

But the question was posed, “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”

And the answer they gave was this.

*That I am not my own, but I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

My friend, rejoice. Rejoice, not because everything is going well, because it's not. Rejoice, not because of what you have, or because of what you have done, but because whose you are. Rejoice in the Lord. Again, I will say, rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything with thanksgiving, with gratitude, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace that Jesus promises his disciples, the peace that passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds, now and forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.