

Philippians 4:4-13

In Everything

I would hazard to guess that we all know someone who is a chronic complainer. No matter what comes to them it is not good enough. It's too hot or too cold. There is never enough money, time, or care directed at them. They feel neglected or worse victimized even when all we can see is that they have enough money to spend and people trying their best to care for their needs and even love them.

My grandmother was someone that rarely expressed joy. She seemed to find the worst in people and felt that she had been treated poorly by her children and husband. I spent a lot of time with her, but had a ground rule; if she spoke harshly about my grandfather, from who in later years had separated from her, or about my mother, who she just didn't seem to love at all, then I would simply say, grandma, don't go there. She knew that I was one of her last remaining visitors and rides so she would heed the warning.

When I took her shopping, she would have lovely conversations with other people sitting on benches in the shopping mall, and they would say to me what a delightful person she was. I would nod and smile, knowing that her unkind nature was a thorn for her family. Hers was a funeral where only a few tears were shed and that, not because she would be missed, but rather because she had missed out on the love and joy others would have shared with her if she had only found a way to be kind and loving to those closest to her.

The Apostle Paul actually had a lot to say about how to live a life of gratitude, thanksgiving, and joy in a way that would bring the peace of God into one's life and to others. The passage we heard read actually comes near the end of Paul's letter to the Philippians. What you may not realize is that Paul is writing these words from a jail cell and he doesn't know if he is going to survive this ordeal or not. Paul was in state that not many of us experience. In that jail cell, Paul would most certainly have longed for the comforts of home, good food, a warm place to lay his head, a place to wash himself.

Yet in this place of depravity, he chose to focus on what had been his ministry since his conversion. He focused on Christ and life in Christ. We hear him say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Not the words one would expect to hear from someone struggling with the day-to-day realities of imprisonment in ancient Rome. But rejoice! is Paul's instruction.

Not only that he continues, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made know to God. Need I remind you again that Paul is sitting in a jail cell and he says, let your gentleness be known to everyone.

Let's stop on that word alone, gentleness. Think about your lives, those whose lives intersect with your own. Think about the conversations of the last week, month or three years you have had with others. And we all know the topics have ranged from covid vaccinations, to freedom convoys, to politics, and now Russia and Ukraine, and the horrifying scenes in Gaza. Now go back to Paul's instruction, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." I encourage you to do your own reflection on how you have or have not let your gentleness be known to everyone around you. And remember gentleness is not about being a door mat that others trounce on, but it is about respect for others as fully human, as made in the image of the creator, and treating them with kindness, humility, and love.

Moving on, Paul says if we let our gentleness be known, not worrying about anything, but in everything praying with thanksgiving, somehow in that, the "peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus." There is a phrase in there worth pausing on, "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding."

I have said so often that I find it difficult to explain what it means to live a life with God at the center, Christ as the focus, and the peace that it brings. Some people say that thinking this way is a cop out or escapism, but once you have experienced that peace from God that surpasses all understanding you get it. It is not a human construct, it defies understanding, but is so deeply felt that one knows that they have experienced the peace of the divine. And the peace is undeniable. The hope for life morphs into a joy that appears unthinkable. Not happiness, but joy, profound joy that one has breath and lives.

The next verses need no preaching. They are an instruction guide for how to think, which in turn will change the way you perceive and experience the world. Hear these words again,

⁸Finally, 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.

Paul follows that up with, ⁹Keep 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 recently heard something that I hadn't thought about before and that was seeing Paul as a mentor. I knew he was, but I hadn't actually named it that way. We have Paul to look to, but maybe you have others in your life who have mentored you and helped you to see the world differently, with beauty, joy, and love. Maybe there is someone you can ask to mentor you to see the world and your relationships in the way that is described by this passage. You see, this kind of thinking does not come naturally to any of us. We all need to work on thinking this way.

Complaining, feeling like you got the short end of the stick, that you are always the one giving the most in your marriage, at work, at the table over a meal, well that comes

naturally. Thinking about what is honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, well that takes practice. You might want to start simply with coming into the door of your home, wherever or whatever kind of home you live in and give thanks, say something pleasant, set the tone with your gentleness, and kindness, and your gratitude.

There is much more that could be said about all of this passage. It is rich with meaning, but when you think on it remember Paul did not write this from the comfort of a couch, or behind a desk, he was in prison and he could say, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

In everything, may you be able to give thanks to God, walk in the world with gentleness, and think on things in a way that can transform your relationships, transform you, and may that transformation be so evident that people wonder at your gratitude, your love, your joy. Amen