“Sounds Easy Enough”

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Philippians 4:1-9

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi in the early 1st century. If you don’t know much about the apostle Paul, I invite you to read up on him in the book of Acts, where you get some of the narrative story about what happened in his life and the things he did, and also in his letters, which he wrote to brand new churches in various cities and are recorded in our New Testament.

The Apostle Paul is a mountain of prophetic witness, a tireless preacher, teacher, and theologian, a church planter and protector who, at one time in his life, as Saul, had poured his best energy into persecuting the church, but now, after seeing the light (literally and figuratively – if you could call it “seeing” – the way we hear of his conversion story, “seeing the light” was more like Saul being struck blind) now, after seeing the light, Saul is Paul – and he pours himself as fiercely and happily into the Church’s defense and growth as he once did into the its persecution.

And so, the Apostle Paul has written a letter to his church family in Philippi. It’s a love letter – from prison. He was imprisoned several times during his missionary journeys, for upsetting local authorities or upsetting people around him with his newfound faith and Christian zeal.

Paul wanted his letter to assure the folks in Philippi that he would be okay – that, even now, the gospel of Christ is unfettered, loose throughout the empire.

It’s important to note this context. Paul didn’t write in a vacuum. It’s easy to read his letters in our Bible and take them as universal truth for all time, but he *was* writing in a particular historical context, to particular historical people.

We see a glimpse of this in our passage this morning as Paul referenced two leaders in the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche. These women were apparently at odds, in conflict over an issue we don’t get to know, and Paul, as founder and pastor of the church, albeit pastor-from-afar for the most part, urged them to unity, calling on not just the recipient of the letter, but all who would hear his words read aloud, to help them resolve this issue and come together once again.

That call to unity is the heart of Paul’s messages to all his churches, and a worthy take-away for the church today.

Earlier in the letter, in chapter 2, Paul urged believers to be of the same mind – not simply the same mind as one another – but the same mind as Christ Jesus. Unity in Christ. Put aside differences and join together in the work of the gospel.

Today’s passage comes from the end of this letter. Paul usually closed his letters with something that moved his readers to act. He likes to pile up the imperative – verbs that command us to do something – and interweave them with blessings to guide the readers’ days and ways until they can gather again to hear this letter read aloud.

There might be something *especially* tender and urgent in today’s verses from this letter. Paul *is* in prison, after all. What if he doesn’t get out? What if he can’t come visit the young church again? What if they must make do on their own? What on Earth are they going to do?

“Therefore, my brothers and sisters…stand firm in the Lord in this way.”

Okay. Here come the imperatives, the commands, the to-do list from Paul. Even from a distance, and through prison bars, Paul knows what to do, how to call this congregation together.

Stand firm in the Lord in this way: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” 

*Rejoice?* Rejoice. Not once but twice. How do you rejoice when your friend and pastor is in prison? How do you rejoice, how do you preach joy when once again the news of the week is devastating, and you see suffering and grief everywhere you turn?

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” Gentleness is not where I would imagine Paul going with this. Here are these faithful and hopeful believers in Philippi – they’ve made it to the page in the letter when he’s meant to be calling them to action, the Ephesians got to put on the whole armor of God in their letter, for goodness’ sake, and this is what they get: Gentleness.

How do you stand firm in gentleness when our collective nerves are raw

and we have had it *up to here* with partisan politics and you are just dying to give your neighbor or uncle or co-worker (or pastor) a piece of your mind because maybe then they’d see reason – they’d see things your way?

“Do not worry about anything.”

Do not worry. HA! May as well tell the sun not to shine. Yeah, we’ll come back to this in a couple weeks – shameless plug - save the date for our November sermon series. On Sunday, November 8 we’ll be talking about worry.

“In everything in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.” OK, praying.

Yes. This is something I can do – this is something the church is good at – we are people of prayer. But how do we know what to pray for? Does Paul truly mean in *everything?* Or am I really only meant to pray about certain things? Does God care about our prayers for sports victories and personal gains in the same way God cares about communal suffering and injustice?

“And finally – 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.” Sounds easy enough. Except it’s not.

I find myself thinking about all kinds of things that do not fall into these categories, for a variety of reasons – I am parenting a young child but I am not myself a “young mom,” which means I had waaaaay too many years of doing life my way and a “threenager” bossing me around daily brings my nerves to the edge of reason.

And, we live in a digital age, and having *all* access to *all* information at *all* times means that commendable and excellent easily get watered down into “fine.” AND, confession: when I want to unwind and turn my brain off, while I do sometimes choose entertainment options that are “worthy of praise”: beautifully written books, brilliant music, and compelling cinema, more often than not I fill my time with garbage on Netflix that I can barely remember.

And Paul ends this list of commands with: “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.”

Sounds easy enough, right?

Whew. I mean, yes. Let’s do those things. I want to do those things.

But my goodness is it hard sometimes.

I feel like we can read this whole passage from Paul and just feel like total failure. It sounds so simple, but in practice, it’s so difficult.

Theologians say it’s because we live in a broken, sinful world. And I see that, truly. There is suffering and injustice in our world – from human action, like systems of oppression and individual acts of harm, and also from natural consequences, like disasters, accidents, and disease.

Sometimes there’s overlap. The world is broken, which is there is need of Christ and redemption, why the Church is called into being. And why, perhaps, Paul was so keen on unity – he could see the big picture, he understood the mission of the Church in an immediate there-and-then sense, and also the epic, cosmic sense of partnering with God in the ongoing work of the gospel.

You know, when we look at just a part of this letter, or any of the New Testament letters, we can miss out on that bigger picture – I encourage you to read the whole thing – it’s only 4 short chapters.

Again and again throughout his letters, Paul wrote of unity, urged individual congregations to unity, to be of the same mind.

There’s no room for competition in the church – only collaboration. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright uses an illustration that is close to my heart. A group of actors and crew members putting on a play. The thing will fail if everyone focuses on *me*, but when *us* can trump *me* – when everyone from star to stagehand is focused on the same goal – and rather than each self trying to be the best, each instead *offers* the very best of their self. That is the ideal. That is when something beautiful and true is created and shared with the world.

Here’s one of my favorite sayings: “There’s no such thing as one Christian.” Christians are Christians in community. From the very beginning, God created us to be in community, and all throughout Scripture, God is at work in communities. Absolutely, individuals are gifted and called and lifted up for specific tasks, but the general work of following Jesus is done in community. Which is why none of the “you”s in Paul’s letters are singular – they are all plural, because he was writing to communities! This is why we should have a whole mess of Southerners to do the next Bible translation, because the word “y’all” sure does come in handy. So as you read Paul’s letters – remember that he is talking to and about “y’all.” Technically, “all y’all,” right?

Our faith is meant to be lived out, worked out in community, and even when that community can’t look quite like we’d like it to, we are called to hang in there, together, to trust in the abiding presence of God, to trust that this, too, shall pass.

Just like Paul, we are living in a particular historic time and we cannot be church in a vacuum, nor can we be simply a bunch of individuals who happen to worship in the same congregation. We are a community of faith – a church, and we are called to unity in Christ.

We are living in a time of great division – social, economic, and ideological. Our upcoming election is cloaked in extreme and divisive rhetoric, not to mention the volatility and politicizing of the ongoing crisis of the covid pandemic, which has physically separated us, as well. Family members are at odds with one another, neighbor is set against neighbor. Disunity is everywhere.

Now is the time for the Church to stand firm and be the Church, to live into Paul’s calling to our ancestors in Philippi;

to help one another when there is conflict, like Euodia and Syntyche,

to help one another live this calling out together;

to rejoice in the Lord, especially when joy seems hard to come by:

to let our gentleness be known to everyone, not in backing down from

naming injustice but standing firm in compassion;

to not let worry consume us but to pray in a way that shapes our hearts

and reframes our focus away from ourselves and onto the needs and

wellbeing of others;

to guide our thoughts toward things that bring life and turn us outward

rather than dwelling on what pulls us downward and inward for our

thoughts *will* lead us to action– think about what is true, what is

honorable, what is just, what is pure, what is pleasing, what is

commendable, what is excellent and worthy of praise.

And to keep on doing these things.

*Keep on doing,* Paul writes in verse 9. This has been the message to the Church for 2,000 years. Keep on doing these things. This is our calling.

Keep on doing these things, Paul wrote from prison, and the God of peace *will* be with us. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.