

Sermon, November 20, 2022

Philippians 4:4-9  
"Thanksgiving and the God of Peace"

Our reading brings us, once again, to an ancient church, which is undergoing turmoil. In this case there are some inner conflicts within the congregation, but the greater problem has to do with problems outside of the church. Remember that we are looking at a church in the very earliest years of Christian history, and they are dealing with negative forces, both governmental and religious, that are trying to stifle the growth of this new movement or destroy it altogether. But Paul is trying to give them a sense of hope and encouraging them to keep their eyes on their goal rather than the forces that want to bring them down.

He tells them to Rejoice in the Lord always, with an emphasis on the word always, regardless of the negative forces surrounding them; and to let their gentleness known to everyone. This was very important because of the way they were viewed from outside. The occupying Roman government saw the followers of Jesus as enemies of the state, just as they had perceived Jesus, and executed him for it. There were other strange beliefs and accusations pointed at them. There were even those who believed that these early Christians were cannibals, because it was heard that they ate and drank the body and blood of Jesus, referring, of course, to the Lord's Supper. And so, Paul wants them to show the world what they were really all about - gentleness, mercy, forgiveness, peace and love.

Think for a moment how that may pertain to today's church. We aren't seen as cannibals, or, necessarily, a threat to the state, but for many in today's secular society we are seen as irrelevant to their lives. This is one reason why millions have left the church in recent decades, and why others don't seek us out. We have to find ways to show the world that the church still has importance and things to offer a world that could use a lot more gentleness, mercy, forgiveness, peace, and love.

In the midst of all that disturbance Paul insists that they should not worry about anything. That's a pretty tall order, both back then and now! Along with whatever challenges we may be facing in our individual lives we are living in a world plagued by war, a rise in racial and ethnic hatred and divisions, political and religious violence, and an ever-growing ecological crisis, to name a few.

The reason Paul insists that we not worry is because "the Lord is near", that is, no matter what we may be grappling with, the Spirit of Christ is with us. It is to that Spirit that we must place our trust. But, by this, I don't think Paul means we should just sit back and let God deal with it all, but in our awareness that the Lord is near we find "the peace that surpasses all

understanding". By that I think he is talking about a peace that we find within ourselves when all the turmoil and chaos that surrounds us should be causing us worry, fear, and anxiety. Such peace should give us the hope, the faith, the courage, and the strength to face and deal with whatever challenges may be before us. There is a famous line at the end of a novel by Samuel Beckett called "The Unnamable", that reads, "I can't go on, I'll go on." It speaks to those times in life when the weight of the world feels like it's sitting on our shoulders - that problems are such that it's a challenge to even get out of bed, yet somehow, we find something deep inside of ourselves that moves us forward even if it's just slowly placing one foot in front of the other. At such times it's always a help and a blessing to know that we are not alone - that someone is there to lift us up, to support and walk beside us. This, to me, is also what "the peace that surpasses all understanding" is about. I believe it can also be called the strength and courage that surpasses all understanding, as well as the faith, the hope, and the love that surpasses all understanding! That even in our darkest hours we can go on knowing that the Lord is near, that the spirit of Jesus Christ is walking by our side. For this, and for all the blessings of this life we offer God our thanksgiving! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Gracious and generous God, in this Thanksgiving week we express our gratitude for all that fills our lives - for the gifts of family and friends, for the beauties and bounties of the earth, for the food and drink that nourishes us for life and for service in your name. We also recognize that this is a difficult time for some - for Native Americans who see this as a time of mourning, for the homeless and the hungry, for the lonely and the sick in body, mind, and spirit. We pray for them knowing of your love and care for them. We thank you, as always, for the precious gift of the church, for our congregation, and for the gift of your Son Jesus who stands in our midst and in our hearts.... Amen