

Sermon , October 15, 2023

Philippians 4:1-9

“ The Peace that Passes All Understanding “

This is a remarkable passage in a remarkable letter. It is a joyful letter. As Paul says to those who hear his words, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice.” But it is not just the words that make it so remarkable. It is the circumstances in which it was written. When Paul was writing it, he was in prison, and considering the atmosphere of the times it was not certain he would ever leave the prison alive! It is not clear which prison he was in when he wrote to the congregation in Philippi , but we can be assured he was in a dangerous situation.

His faith was extraordinary, and he is a wonderful model for all Christians facing difficult and challenging times. In fact, at the end of the passage he even says, “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.”

So, what is to be found behind such faith? Well, to begin with, he says in verse five, “The Lord is near”. As bleak as his circumstances were, he could not, and would not, deny God’s presence in his life. He then goes on to say, “ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God”.

“Do not worry about anything!” That’s a tall order, and what a challenge that puts before us in these trying times - to offer God thanksgiving even when there may be a shortage of things to be thankful for, and to lay before God in prayer your needs, trusting in God’s response. After all, isn’t that which faith is all about. - trust!

One way in which God responds is what Paul calls “ the peace that passes all understanding”. It is a spiritual state of being in which one is filled with a great sense of inner peace in times when there seems to be no reason for such peace. When the great 20th century pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was executed, one of the Nazi guards in the prison remarked that he had never seen anyone do to his death with so great a sense of peace - the peace of God that passes all understand - the peace we can all experience when we open ourselves to the presence of God’s Holy Spirit within us.

However, we recognize that it is not totally beyond understanding when recognize it as being present and revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Paul exhorts the Philippians congregation to focus their attention on all that is honorable, and pure, and commendable, etc., and to seek excellence as well as all that is worthy of praise. It almost sounds like Paul is advocating for the power of positive thinking, and he is most certainly pointing them away from the negativity that seems to be embraced by some, which tends to erase all sense of hope. It is generally the case that when we look to the future through a lens of negativity we are already halfway there. And so positive thought is the proffered way to go, but for Paul the power is not in the thought itself, but, instead, the thought tied to faith in God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

And, so, as we look to the future both as individuals and a congregation we should remember these words from 2 Timothy, “ For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” I think that when he speaks of power, he is not talking of power in the world’s way of looking at it, and embodying it, but a unique form of power grounded in love. And when he mentions “ a sound mind” he is referring to a mind at peace. Again, it is a peace that transcends all human understanding, a peace that we can experience beyond the borders of human reasoning, a peace that fills our hearts as well as our minds, a peace that tells us that God is near, that God dwells within us. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we are grateful for your holy presence, and seek your guidance and wisdom. We thank you for the gift of your Son Jesus, and may he be our guide as we face the many challenges before us. We open our hearts to your Holy Spirit that we may know the peace that passes all understanding.

Today we pray for peace in Israel and the Gaza Strip. We commend to you those who have died, and for healing for the wounded. We pray for those who are displaced from their homes, and, especially, for the children who are so traumatized. We pray for a swift end to the violence, and that it not spread further throughout the Middle East. We also ask that you help us end the malignancy of antisemitism around the world, and for your blessing on your Jewish children. We pray as well for other countries now torn by war, lifting up Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Haiti, and Ukraine. May the peace that passes all understanding spread through hearts around the world. Amen.