

This is the third week exploring Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is such a rich letter and a lot of fun to see how Paul might be talking to us as well as the Philippians of old. Rev. Wheeler gets to conclude this sermon series on Philippians next weekend so today I going to slow down and truly cherish my final sermonic moments with the Philippians.

I invite us to relish each of the words in the letter lesson before us today just like we would enjoy a long warm bath or shower end of the day of hard physical labor or how we might treat ourselves to the joy of a massage. Have you ever had a massage? I had not until our visit to see our daughter, her husband and family in India at the beginning of this year. I had never thought of getting a massage before but while in India my skin was dry and a bit itchy so as I passed a massage salon near our hotel each day and looked at the photos in their window of people receiving full body massages with oil it looked so soothing. Finally, I inquired about the price. One thousand rupees for a one hour full body massage with the oil of my choice. That did it since 1,000 rupees is \$15. It was worth it and so soothing. I invite us to relish each word in our letter lesson like we might a warm bath or soothing massage.

^{4:4} "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." The resounding theme throughout the letter to the Philippians is that of joy. Paul is filled with joy as he thinks of the love of God flowing through the Philippians congregation. Let's review some of Paul's expressions of joy in this letter.

Chapter one, verse 3, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in everyone of my prayers for all of you." There can be many emotions connected with prayer and Paul reminds us that one of the emotions can certainly be joy as he talks about "constantly praying with joy..."

At one point, after talking about the difficulties he has experienced Paul states in verses 17-18 of chapter 2, "...I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you must be glad and rejoice with me." He finds strength and joy from the fact that the Philippians have him in their prayers as he is going through his challenges. That makes sense doesn't it? A smile comes to our face when we know that others are pulling and praying for us.

Paul opens chapter three with words of encourage; "My brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord." Paul is reminding the Philippians as his words remind us that Christian joy is not circumstantial in nature but it is grounded in God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Please remember that Paul is writing this joy filled letter while he sits in prison facing capital charges. "My brothers and sisters, rejoice (in what) the Lord."

Paul starts off this fourth and final chapter of his letter with words of joy and affirmation.

4:1, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, who I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord."

Isn't that a nice affirmation? To think that we are someone's joy and crown puts a smile on our face and a warm feeling in our heart.

Now we return to the opening verse of our lesson today, Philippians 4:4, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Obviously joy is to be a main element of our faith experience. Our joy comes from knowing we have a map for life that is found in the teachings of Jesus. Our joy comes from knowing that we are one with God and that is a gift to us through Jesus. Our joy comes from knowing other children of God who are round about us. Our joy comes from knowing we have fulfilling work to do, here and now, as the spirit of God flows through us. Our joy comes from knowing that our abundant life is also eternal in nature through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice.

Paul then gives some direction for daily living as in verse 5 as he states; “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” The Greek word, *epiekes*, that is translated as gentleness in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible also denotes generosity towards others or consideration of others. When someone is suffering gentleness is needed. When another is in need then generosity can be appropriate. When a decision is to be made then consideration of others is critical. With the joy of the Lord in our hearts we can share our *epiekes* with others.

Then Paul reminds that “The Lord is near.” These are words of assurance that we need to be reminded about whenever we worry, fret or are filled with fear. It echoes Psalm 145:18, “The Lord is near all who call upon him.” These words of reassurance are a point of joy that blend into verse six, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Jesus said the same thing during his Sermon on the Mount when he declared, “...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”(Matthew 6:25-27).

Paul encourages us to pray with an attitude of thanksgiving. If I pray with thanksgiving that means I am thanking God in advance for whatever the outcome is for that which I am praying about. At one point in Paul’s life he was praying to be the best Pharisee he might be. He was praying to that he might arrest and put on trail as many Christians as he might be able to find. He prayed to be a good and strict Pharisee. God had other plans for Paul. Instead of wiping out the followers of Jesus he introduced more people to Christianity than any other person in the first generation church. If I pray with thanksgiving that means I am thanking God in advance for whatever the outcome is for that which I am praying about.

A prayer life that is filled with joy as Paul lifts up in this letter (1:3) and a prayer life that is filled with thanksgiving as Paul lift up (4:6) leads to the peace that Paul lifts up in verse 7; “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Our Methodist tradition recalls that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the late 1700’s, had the “peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” in his heart just before he breathed his last breath. With friends gathered round him, Wesley who died at the age of 88 on the 2nd of March, 1791. Grasping the hands of those who loved him, he repeatedly told them farewell.

At the end, when nearly all his strength was gone, his reported last words were: *The best of all is, God is with us.* That is the peace of God within.

Let’s turn to the final two verses from our letter lesson today.

⁸ 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. Paul knows that our mind, heart and spirit provide us or deprive of joy, thankfulness and peace therefore he says fill your mind with that which is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and praise worthy. Paul also knew that our mind, heart and spirit lead us to action as well and that we where our letter lesson ends today, verse 9, the actions of a Christian. ⁹ 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.

As individual Christians, what are we to do? As St. Paul church, what are we to do? One thing is to take time and enjoy the words of scripture as we would enjoy a wonderful massage or warm bath.

As individual Christians, what are we to do? As St. Paul church, what are we to do? Whatever it is, Paul encourages us to do it with joy! “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”