

The Full Philippian Workout

Sunday, October 11, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Philippians 4:2-9

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 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. 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.

I feel sorry for the family physicians of the world when I think of all the people that come to them seeking a “magic pill” for their medical problems. It must be frustrating that so many people come to the doctor with problems like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart issues, looking only for some medication which by itself can eliminate the problem, when what they really need to do is make changes in their lifestyle. Medical doctors are ever preaching healthy living habits while most of the world wants only a magic pill, and when the medication alone does not sufficiently treat the problem, the patient complains and seeks some other magic pill which might do the trick. There are very few magic pills in life, and most problems require a fuller response.

Today’s epistle lesson reminds me of the magic pill problem, because we find in Philippians 4 a much-quoted verse which many have taken as a magic pill for the pervasive problem of worry. *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* This is wonderful advice which keeps many people a step ahead of anxiety. But some find little success with this piece of divine counsel, and there is a reason for this varied success rate. While this is God’s Word from the Bible, this

passage often loses its power as this good advice is separated from the fuller picture of a total spiritual training program. To the worriers of the world, and I count myself among those ranks, I commend not only Philippians 4:6-7, but the fuller treatment for the worried spirit which takes in the whole passage. I call it the full Philippian workout and it is a program aimed at changing our ways of *worship*, of *thinking* and of *doing*, and you can tell from the start that this is a very full workout!

The first step in this workout, and I am taking the liberty of starting in the middle of the passage, is that of a healthy life of worship. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* Rejoice! Be in the habit of praise! Our first thought may be of our own personal habits of praise and worship, but the way to really make this command come alive is to get into the habit of worshipping regularly with God's people! How we need to worship! Yes, there are things we can do as an individual. We can keep a strong daily devotional life of Bible reading, prayer and other Christian readings. A few years back someone gave me a journal to write in each day. I was already in that habit, but this journal had a special feature. It was a gratitude journal and each day, among my reflections, I was to celebrate something for which I was grateful. That was a helpful habit! There are individual habits of praise and worship which can help us, but the truly important matter is that we join others in praise, for worship is contagious and corporate worship is powerful.

When speaking of worship, I like to break it down into two important parts. We are to *thank* God, and to *praise* God, and while both are similar there is an important distinction between the two words which I have found most helpful. To thank God is to express gratitude to God for what God has done for us, and God has done plenty, even giving His only Son! Thanksgiving is a great and glorious thing, but praise seems to go a step even higher than thanks. To praise God is to simply honor God for all that God is. *Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised* said the psalmist, and that is praise. It is important that we both thank and praise God. The importance of both thanks and praise can be understood in human friendships. I may thank my wife for a whole laundry list of things which she does, and this is good, but many a wife has begun to wonder over time, "Am I loved only for the things that I do?" A friend should be thanked, but also praised. This means letting someone know that they are a wonderful person simply for being who they are.

God is to be worshipped, and God is to be addressed in prayer. *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* Here is where we meet the famous antidote to worry. Pray! In this passage Paul urges us to pray for the things that we might otherwise worry about. I have been blessed much in my lifetime by the worry lists that I have written out to give expression to the countless items which cause me to worry. And having written down those worries I have then lifted each one to God in prayer. It is amazing how these worries evaporate when exposed to the light and lifted to God. But like a bug infestation, worries waste little time in returning, and the work of

prayer becomes an ongoing task. This is why Paul speaks of taking *everything* to God in prayer.

We are told to pray *with thanksgiving*, which is often difficult when one is greatly disturbed by a worry or pain. Some have obeyed this command by mentioning whatever word of thanks they can think of, and it often sounds insincere or even silly. "God, help my brother as he deals with heart disease... and, uh, thank You for my getting all my bills paid for the week." If the only thanksgiving you can offer to God may seem trivial or silly, offer it to God anyway and it will be gladly received. What we must be working toward is a strong and ongoing sense of gratitude to God such that thanks comes easily and naturally to us. Corporate worship, the weekly and more often if we can, worship of God among the fellowship of the Church is a crucial element in developing a heart of praise.

It is in the sentence which we find the great promise of peace. *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Anxiety is a terrible affliction and it is very understandable that so many want desperately to escape its grasp, but we must also pay attention to the kind of rescue which we are offered. Paul tells us of *the peace of God*. Some pursue this cure for anxiety by simply doing the work of praying in hopes that this will take care of the problem, and all this is done with little thought of God. Like all of our faith, it is a relational matter. If we are simply seeking peace and quietness of spirit, we are not paying attention to the scripture. We are told that we will receive *the peace of God*. We will be drawn near to God and have the joy of God's calming presence. If you are not comfortable with the idea of spending time with God, then you may not find this peace very peaceful.

Our spiritual workout toward a peaceful, anxiety free walk with God begins with worship, but there is more. Paul also addresses the matter of our *thinking*, and this may sound just a bit creepy. We hear of cults and dictators trying to control the thinking of their people, and naturally we want no parts of this, but this is not what God is after. God wants us to be thinking healthy and wholesome thoughts. *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.* This is a tall order, and the clear intention of the command is that we set our minds to thinking upon good, positive and uplifting things. In my parent's day there was a song which was based upon a sermon from Father Divine: *Accentuate the Positive*. The song was meant to be lightly humorous, but it still gave one much to consider.

You got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mr. In-Between. You got to spread love, up to the maximum, bring gloom down to the minimum. Have faith, or pandemonium soon will arrive upon the scene.

I can say amen to all that!

"But where are we to find good and positive things to think about in such a fallen and negative world?" Good question. When the world just seems too dark and sad, start with the Bible. I learned early on that one of the great delights of reading the Bible, especially the Gospels, was to see Jesus, so pure, good and beautiful, and in such contrast to the world. Read, and let the scriptures lift your spirit and elevate your thoughts. Or try counting your blessings. This has been a challenging month for the Haun family. There was the car accident and Kay's recovery. I chipped a tooth, and saw the eye doctor about a cataract, and then the microwave oven broke down. The computer at the Church is having all kinds of troubles which seems to disrupt everything, and the nasty virus is still all around us. It is all too easy to feel like the world is falling apart and to become discouraged, and I am well aware that everybody goes through these kinds of times on a semi-regular basis. What's a believer to do? One may feel surrounded by the negative, but the eyes of faith can see much more, and can see so much good. I have so many blessings to count just from this year, from a miracle grandson to a granddaughter soon to arrive. We have been spared serious injury, and while we and our abode seem to be falling apart, we have doctors and repairmen to put us back together. We have Scott Musser who can put any computer system back on its feet. And even if this whole world should fall apart, we have Christ and the glorious Kingdom! There is so much good to celebrate. Accentuate the positive! On one level this may sound like a trivial matter of keeping oneself in a good mood, but there is much more to it. This is an ongoing spiritual battle and we must not grow weary of the fight.

Yes, this is a negative world, and we feel that negativity keenly in a presidential election year. By their own admission each team will tell you that their plan is primarily comprised of attacks and smear. Many were shocked years ago to learn from high school debate that the argument usually goes not to the one who can build up a good proposal, but to the one who can do the most damage to their opponent. Ours always has been a negative and hurtful world. What are you doing to keep that negativity level down? Are you feeding your spirit with cable news, cynical television programs and too many friends with bad attitudes? We can turn away from these negatives, and soon find life a much more joyous proposition!

Be positive, and by that I do not mean pasting on a fake smile. One of my favorite strategies to accomplish this is to imitate positive people that you know. Just to be around such people makes a positive difference, but don't stop there. Make a careful study of these people to learn all you can about being positive. In verse five Paul tells the Philippians, *Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.* He is referring to the gracious and conscientious people of Philippi whose warmth and good heartedness is obvious to all around them. He is cheering on those who live with a glad sense of Jesus' nearness. I know a bunch of people who live this way, and I want

to be like them! Surround yourself with positive people and see the difference that it makes. Put yourself in a positive place.

Finally, we come to the matter of healthy *doing*, or as some would say, where the rubber meets the road. Our faith is not just a matter of warm thoughts and pleasant feelings of the mind and heart. We are to be real doers. *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.* Paul holds himself up as an example of a Christian life, which was not done as an act of a big ego. Paul knew his high calling and the importance of being a good leader and example, so he freely presented himself as just that. We may be quick to humbly criticize ourselves and insist that we are not a glimmering example of faith, and though this does demonstrate a certain humility, it can also show a negligence of duty! When you find yourself in a place where you need to be a good Christian example, then don't give a humility/excuse speech. Be an example!

This passage ends with a command to *act* as disciples of Christ, and the biggest assignment to practical Christian action is what begins the paragraph. *I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.* There was a conflict in Philippi. These two women, apparently leaders in that congregation, were not getting along. While we are not given the details of the disagreement, we do know that these were hard working leaders who were dear to Paul's heart, and their conflict was causing Paul's heart to break. The Apostle's sadness was based upon both his love for the Church and concern for the harm that such conflicts do, as well as an affection to two fine people. Note also that Paul points out no villains or victims in this dust-up but only longs for their reconciliation.

Euodia and Syntyche add a dose of reality to the Philippian letter, which is both discouraging and encouraging. The Philippian Epistle is a popular study for Christians since it is a letter to a healthy congregation with a theme of joy. What is not to love about that? But even a healthy and thriving faith family has their troubles. And while we have few details of the conflict, we all know about Church conflicts! They can do so much damage. It is not uncommon for a conflict between two leaders to cause a split in a congregation and to ruin the ministry of a family of faith. We also know that most of us avoid being involved in such conflicts as we would avoid the plague! This natural instinct may be helpful as it helps keep anger from spreading, but it can also be counterproductive as it can keep people from stepping forward and working toward resolution and reconciliation. Paul may have been tempted to sweep this problem under the rug and avoid even mentioning it, but he cared too much for the Church and for these two ladies of faith.

Peacemaking is not easy work, but this is our calling, and the local Church is a wonderful laboratory to try out our peacemaking skills. Especially in our day of television, radio and abundant literature it is so tempting to become a stay at home, Church-less Christian. What a joy it can be to humbly walk with Jesus but not have to bother with

all those difficult people! But Jesus wants us to have nothing to do with such an understanding of faith. We are to be the Church, and this means gathering and getting along! One of the great tragedies of modern Protestantism is that our proper stress upon personal faith often leads to a lack of accent upon the Church. We feel that we can get along fine on our own, just me and Jesus, and that the Church is an option. And when we do not agree with each other we can be quick to leave or start a new congregation. Paul gives us no magic answers as to how we can easily get along with everyone around us, because there is no magic answer to getting along with others. It is hard work. Church people, fellow Christians, and especially pastors, can be very annoying and we can find ourselves asking why God put us together. What we do know is that God has put us together, so get along!

Having laid out this tough assignment, I offer this word of encouragement. Do you know a peacemaker? Do you know someone who is good at working with others, handles conflict well and helps others get along? Study that person. Imitate them. Learn the hard lessons of peacemaking, and in time God will be doing a wonderful work in your heart by the Spirit. Be a peacemaker.

Healthy praise, healthy thinking and healthy doing add up to quite a rigorous workout! This is all a far cry from the magic anti-anxiety pill that we may have been seeking, but it is the counsel God has to offer. Perhaps it is the workout that you have been carefully avoiding. Let us always remember that magic pills are an illusion, but life and peace in Jesus Christ is real. Following Christ may be a real work out, but with the Spirit's power, and with each other, we can do it. *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*