

Sermon 11-22-20 - Choose to be thankful
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Did you notice my sermon title? Choose to be thankful. Is that a choice you made when you woke up this morning? Did you choose to be thankful? Are you thankful right now? Some of you may be. Maybe you had a great week. You are feeling on top of the world. If that is true, I am happy for you. I am.

But my guess is that you are in the minority. Surveys show that at any given moment only about a third of us would rate ourselves as genuinely happy. Many of us do not feel like we have a whole lot to be thankful for right now. That is especially true in the midst of a pandemic. Some of us are carrying heavy burdens. Some are sick, worried, scared, frustrated. We may hurt for those we love. Some of you feel more like weeping or screaming than giving thanks. All of which makes it hard to relate to Paul's advice to the Philippians:

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. — Phil 4:4-9

Before you turn down your hearing aids and close your minds to what Paul was saying, let me assure you that Paul was not writing from an ivy covered tower, looking at the world through rose colored glasses. Paul was writing from prison where he was awaiting execution and he was writing to a church caught up in a divisive conflict. The church to which he was writing was being torn apart by a growing conflict between two women, both good friends of his. This passage, sweet as it sounds as it speaks of rejoicing and peace and purity and excellence, is really about conflict and dealing with conflict, about choosing to be thankful even in conflicted times, times like ours.

Those of you who know me well know that I am no fan of conflict. I am a 9 on the Engram personality test. The greatest desire of 9's is that everyone simply get along. And if they can't get along to at least have the common decency to act like they did. I agree with Linus Van Pelt of Peanuts fame. He once stated: "I have a distinct philosophy in life. There is no problem so big or so complex that it cannot be run away from."

My initial reaction to conflict is to fix it and if I can't fix it then run. This actually works fairly well in the church since most churches try to avoid conflict. That said, sometimes conflicts can grow and spread until they can no longer be ignored, even by those of us who hate conflict.

Paul found himself confronted by just such a conflict. There were two women in the Philippian church, sisters in Christ, who had worked hard by Paul's side spreading the Gospel. At one time they had loved each other deeply. But now they were caught up in a great, unnamed conflict; a conflict which was threatening to rip the church in two. Indeed, it had gotten so bad that the church sent a messenger to Rome, to find Paul and ask him to intervene. Unfortunately, Paul was in prison and could not go to

Philippi, so he did the only thing he could. He wrote a letter to the church and the two women offering advice.

Let me pause to note that some of you who are new to the church may be a bit taken aback to hear that there was conflict in a church. Maybe you came to church in hopes of escaping the conflict that plagues the rest of your life. Perhaps you thought that in church you had finally found a safe place where people were above conflict. If that is true, I had best burst your bubble right now and tell you that church folk fight. In fact, church folk can fight with the best of them.

If you think about it it only makes sense that church members would fight. There are two ingredients necessary for a good fight. First, you have to have people who have different opinions or approaches to an issue and second, they have to care enough to fight about it.

If people think alike, if they are in agreement, there is no reason for conflict. Or if the issue is minor, if neither party really cares, then it is not likely to be worth fighting over. Oh, but when people both disagree and care deeply, then watch the fireworks fly. There are few things that we care as deeply about as our faith. Our faith defines our hope and our future. We care deeply about our churches and how they do things. Yet we are different people and we do not always see eye to eye. Mostly that is a good thing. The body of Christ is supposed to be a place for all of God's children. We are a diverse people with diverse gifts. Which means that when we gather as a church we represent a wide variety of opinions and ideas.

The challenge is, that when we gather a wide variety of people from different backgrounds with differing opinions and place them in an organization they care as deeply about as the church, we are setting ourselves up for conflict. That is what happened to Paul. He was writing to one of his churches that was embroiled in conflict. These were people he loved. So, with aching heart he offered advice. It is good advice, not just for the church in Philippi, but for anyone who finds themselves dealing with conflict in life.

Paul's advice is good, but I have to confess that when I first read it it made little sense to me. Paul's first recommendation for folks caught up in conflict is not something most of us would think of doing. Paul suggests that we choose to give thanks. More than just thanks, he recommends that we begin by rejoicing. He tells us to rejoice in the midst of conflict. And if that was not bad enough he then tells us to rejoice again.

But why would we choose to be thankful in the middle of a conflict? How can we even do that? How can we rejoice in the midst of COVID? How can we rejoice after what was said to us last week? How can we rejoice when our world has been tipped upside down? How can we rejoice after what the bishop, the governor, the president, our best friend, you name them said? This feels like a time to be upset not give thanks. It seems wrong to rejoice right now. It seems disingenuous. Maybe later, when the conflict is over we can rejoice, but not now.

However, Paul is saying, "Don't wait. Rejoice now. Choose thanks even in the midst of conflict, especially in the midst of conflict. Because when you stop to give thanks you get a different, better perspective on things.

But how do we do that? How do we rejoice when we don't feel like rejoicing? Let me get at the answer in a roundabout way. Have you ever been around a couple who have fallen in love? Who are floating on a cloud? They are constantly rejoicing in one another and their newfound love. If something goes awry in their world it is no big deal to them. Flat tire on the freeway... who cares? What is that in comparison to their love. Spilled grape juice on the new carpet... what does it matter as long as they are together?

They are too busy rejoicing in one another to let the little challenges of life get to them. Their love causes them to look at the world through rose colored glasses.

Paul is asking us to don our own rose colored glasses. He reminds us that no matter what our immediate circumstances we have a lot to rejoice about. After all, we are a part of the body of Christ, the Spirit is with us, we are loved by God, and we are bound for heaven. What are the challenges of life compared to that?

Then Paul practices what he is preaching. He gives thanks and rejoices in the midst of incredibly difficult circumstances. Remember Paul is in prison awaiting execution. If Paul could rejoice in prison, we can rejoice no matter where we are.

But back to Paul's advice on conflict. He begins by asking us to **put the conflict in perspective**. Instead of rehearsing the conflict over and over in our minds until it grows to dominate our life, we are to set it aside and reflect on the things that truly matter. True, we may not be able to give thanks for the conflict but we can celebrate that God is with us even in the midst of conflict. And that puts us in a far better frame of mind to do what we need to do next.

Paul then reminds us that what matters most is not winning the conflict. We all know folk who always have to win. They constantly have to prove themselves by coming out on top. It doesn't matter whether they are playing Old Maids with a five year old or arguing with their spouse. They have to win. But Paul is saying that we do not have to win to prove ourselves.

A number of years back I read a story in Sport's Illustrated about a wrestler known as Andre' the Giant. Andre' truly was a giant. He stood 7' 4" tall and weighed over 500 pounds. In the interview he said that he could not remember ever being afraid of anyone. 500 pounds of muscle will do that for you. And because he felt secure in his strength he almost never fought. Certainly he had opportunities to fight. As a professional wrestler, a huge man with a huge reputation, people were constantly challenging him, trying to prove themselves. But Andre' refused to fight. He just walked away. He did not need to prove himself. He was secure in his strength. He could have whipped any of them, but he also knew that no one walked away from a fight unscathed, and the victory would prove nothing. So Andre' gently walked away, letting them think they had won, when in reality both of them were victorious.

In much the same way, Paul asks us to **treat others with gentleness**, knowing that winning rarely matters. And we can do that, because, like Andre' the Giant, we do not need to fear losing. We can even let our opponents believe they won, because our strength lies in God not winning.

And because God is with us we **do not need to worry**. I know that one of the things that I hate most about conflict is the way it makes me anxious. When people start to fight i start to worry. I worry that the conflict will build. In the church, I worry that people I care about will leave. Before I know it I become consumed by the worry and the conflict, and try as I may it is hard to find peace.

You see, worries are a lot like ruts in a mountain road. When storms come the ruts soon suck up the flowing water, eroding the ruts deeper and deeper. Worries do that too, if we let them. They form channels that suck up our thoughts and our energy growing deeper and deeper.

That is why Paul warns us of the dangers of becoming anxious. Not that we choose to be anxious. Anxiety just happens, and when it starts it is hard to escape. Just tell yourself to stop worrying sometime. It does not work. It just adds one more worry, as we add worrying that we are worrying to whatever it was that we were worried about before. And the ruts just grow deeper and deeper. It is hard to stop worrying.

Hard, but Paul gives us insight into a way to escape from the trap of worrying. Paul's advice is to fill in the ruts that worries have worn into our minds by **filling them up with good, positive things**.

That is why Paul advises us to fix our minds on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and worthy of praise. Paul is offering us eight filters to help block our worries. He tells us to run everything we see, hear and think through them. He asks us to choose thanks over worry. Even better, he promises that if we do this, over time, our anxieties will be filtered out and we will receive the peace that passes understanding.

I believe that it was that peace that allowed Paul to avoid the trap of getting caught up in the discussion of which of the women was right and wrong. He didn't take sides. We don't even know what they were fighting about. Paul does not tell us. He didn't care who won or lost the conflict. His goal was not declaring a victor or even pointing fingers of blame. His goal was to release them from the bondage of their conflict and to set things right in the church, because their conflict was dividing the body of Christ and sucking up its energy. Paul knew that winning this battle was not worth the price it would inflict on the church. Oh, there are a few battles worth fighting, but not many are worth risking the mission of the church.

So instead of entering into the conflict and deepening the battle lines, Paul asked both the women and the church to move beyond the pettiness of their arguments and focus instead on the things they had to be thankful for. He asked them to look beyond their differences and **focus instead on the good gifts of God**, on those things that were good and right. He hoped that in light of those things they would treat one another gently, knowing that with God on their side they had nothing to fear or prove and so did not need to win. That they could instead focus on those things that truly mattered, which was sharing God's love and building God's kingdom.

Stephen Beck writes of driving down a country road and coming to a very narrow bridge. In front of the bridge was a large yield sign. Seeing the sign, he slowed and looked carefully before proceeding across the bridge. He did not give the sign any more thought until he returned and discovered that there was a yield sign on the other side of the bridge, as well. Drivers coming from both directions were urged to be careful and give way, realizing that getting across the bridge quickly was not as important as avoiding the pain of a collision. Paul reminds us that, as we approach a conflict in the church, it is best to remember what really matters, to remember that maintaining the unity of the body, and carrying out the mission of God, is far more important than winning the conflict at hand.

So, my advice to you, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, in the midst of conflicted times, is that you memorize Paul's advice (**4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. — Phil 4:4-5**) And when conflict rears its ugly head, and it will, ask yourself, "Is this a battle worth fighting, or would it be better to yield and instead choose to be thankful for the good gifts and promises of God?"