

Philippians 4: 1-9 Praise, Prayer and Positivity!

“You’ve got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, Latch onto the affirmative—don’t mess with Mr. In Between! You’ve got to spread joy up to the maximum, bring gloom down to the minimum, have faith, or pandemonium is liable to walk upon the scene.”

Some of you may recognize this as Johnny Mercer’s song (he wrote the lyrics), first released in 1944. It’s been covered by just about everyone since then, and has been part of several movies as well over the years. How Johnny got inspired to write the song was by a comment dropped by his publicity agent, who told him he had gone to hear a sermon and the subject was “accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative,” the first two lines of Johnny’s song. Johnny thought that was rather catchy! So I’m here to tell you I think that preacher was preaching on Philippians 4! It fits our passage for today just right! So if you hear nothing else from the sermon, may that song earworm bless your week to come!

Well, if you were to give three cheers for this Pandemic, what would they be?! Some of us on our darker days might quote Ecclesiastes, “Eat, drink and be glad...” But that is not the Christian way, although they were accused of doing that in their communion feasts! Of course, Methodists are known for doing that very well at our potlucks... But seriously, the apostle Paul, in the big finish to his letter to the people at Philippi, gives us three wonderful cheers that we can practice and throw about like confetti during this pandemic.

In the first verse of the passage, he gives us the foundation for all 3 cheers: Stand fast in the Lord! Particularly as he and they and now we face adversity, that is our bottom line, our saving grace, that we stand firm in Jesus Christ. Here comes another earworm – remember “How Firm a Foundation,” – that great hymn? “That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never no never no never forsake...” “On Christ the solid rock we stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand!” Now you have two earworms, My Hope is Built, and How Firm a Foundation! I hope there is some great hymn singing going on in your cars and homes this next week!

The next two verses are a life application of Paul’s hymn about Christ in Philippians chapter 2, as you recall Pastor Rich’s sermon from two weeks ago, the way up is down, to imitate Christ and seek to have his mind inform your daily decisions and actions: If Euodia and

Syntyche would each be of the same mind in Christ, they would find unity in their humility and their desire to seek the good of others, rather than to put their own opinions first. This is a gentle nudge from Paul, scholars say. If the problem was severe, he would spend a lot longer discussing it and preaching on it. You know how we preachers are! As it is, Paul encourages each of them to be of the same mind in Christ, and reminds his friend (probably Epaphroditus who is delivering the letter, to help them, since they and many others have been great workers for Christ alongside Paul.

Then Paul gets to our three cheers for the Pandemic, and for each and every day of our lives:

1. PRAISE! Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!

Is he nuts??!! Him chained up in a prison cell, us sheltering in place during a pandemic, we are to praise?! YES! Praise the Lord, rejoice in the Lord! We can do this every day, and it is a GREAT way to refocus our perspective on everything! We are not cockeyed optimists (another earworm!) or Pollyanna or Annie just looking for the brightside or tomorrow for it's sake alone, but we are disciples, followers of Jesus Christ, the Lord, who defeats our fiercest foes, who consoles our saddest woes – Ask ye what great thing I know?! He has entered our human story, sends the powers of evil reeling, brings us freedom, light and life and healing!- Rise, shine you people! So rejoice in the Lord, and NO MORE let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground! Jesus comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found! JOY to the World, all the boys and girls! (Ha! Now several more earworms! But they are good ones!)

Paul reminds us to rejoice in the Lord, who IS NEAR – near to us in the Holy Spirit every day, and near in that he will return someday; Paul and the early Christians believed it would be in their lifetime. But we know he is near always, ready to walk with us and talk with us, reminding us we are his own!

And, Paul encourages us to let our gentleness be known to all – this gentleness is a word meaning more than that – it means a steadfast generosity of spirit, like grace: knowing justice, but ready with mercy as needed; like the grace Jesus and God offer to us ALL THE TIME. Make OUR grace, and steadfast generous spirits known to all others, for we are agents, representatives of the Lord Jesus in our world today. May others see and know Jesus, through us and our words and deeds. PRAISE HIM in our words and deeds of steadfast generosity, gentleness and grace.

2. PRAYER! Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God, Paul says.

Jesus teaches us not to worry, because God knows and supplies our needs; he asks, "Can anyone of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ...do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own..." Later he taught us to pray without ceasing, and to expect that God will hear and answer our prayers, and he taught us a prayer that simply covers all our needs, and honors God and our neighbors.

Paul reminds us to make our requests known to God – with prayer, supplication and thanksgiving – remembering our perspective of rejoicing in the Lord! And as Jesus tells us, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." When we share our burdens with God in prayer, our perspective is corrected, and our cares, when shared, are lighter, and God can then work with us to give us peace and rest. As Paul says, the Peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. "In seasons of distress and grief my soul has often found relief and oft escaped the tempter's snare by thy return, sweet hour of prayer." In this season of pandemic, a morning chat, a fireside chat, a bedtime chat with God can go a long way to helping us find relief from worry, and release from the fears that hound us night and day. Stevie Wonder had an awesome song about this, "Many of us feel we walk alone without a friend, never communicating with the One who lives within. Forgetting all about the One who never ever let us down, and we can talk to him anytime, he's always around. When you feel your life's too hard, just go have a talk with God." Have you got an earworm yet?! This week's scripture is found all over in music! Stand firm in the Lord, Rejoice in the Lord, Pray with the Lord...

And lastly,

3. POSITIVITY: Think about what is true honorable and just, pure pleasing and commendable; those things that are excellent and praiseworthy – focus on them! And keep following what Paul has taught and lived with them, and the God of peace will be with them.

So, latch on to the affirmative, and keep the faith; no time for Mr. In Between, and don't let pandemonium on the scene!

Scholars say that Paul's list resembles lists of virtues and values that pagans had, as well as those of the Jewish traditions. If you think about it, these are traits we ascribe to Jesus Christ as well. If we can keep our eyes turned upon Jesus, and keep our feet in his footsteps, our hands placed in his hands, what a wonderful world this would be! If we could wake up each morning with our minds stayed on Jesus, and whether at

work or at home, turn to Jesus in prayer, what a wonderful world this would be! St Francis expected, looked for, and saw God's hand everywhere, in the natural world, and in the people he met. Our new pope, who took his name, is much the same way. We too, are called to be that way, to see God's kingdom breaking in everywhere, and to point it out and embody it for others, like Jesus did: "Consider the lilies, they neither toil nor spin, yet even King Solomon was not as well dressed as they!" Dr. Howard Thurman, pastor and professor and Christian author and leader in Spiritual formation wrote: "Whatever may be the tensions and stresses of a particular day, there is always lurking close at hand the trailing beauty of forgotten joy, or unremembered peace." Think about that! We always have memories of beauty and peace we can call to mind, if we are just too tired to look for it in this day. And we are never alone in our days – that may be an actual problem for some; but what I mean is that God never leaves us alone to live through our days. God is every more ready to hear, than we are to pray – that is so true, and in our church liturgy, as well. So let us Stand on the Promises, focus on the wonderful words of life, noticing the many moments of amazing grace in our days, giving praise for the beauty of the earth and the fruits of this creation, asking God and Christ to be our vision as we lean on their everlasting arms, secure in the knowledge that our hope is built on nothing less than fairest Lord Jesus. If we can work at making this our attitude, perspective and path, then we can sing with all the saints, "It is well with my soul," and we will experience what Paul promises, that the God of peace IS with us.

So, let's accentuate the positive: Rejoice and Praise our God, Christ and creation! Eliminate the negative – why worry when you can pray? And latch on to the affirmative in life, Be Positive and don't mess with in between or pandemonium! Stand firm in the Lord, throughout this Pandemic, and have the same mind in Christ Jesus, he is near, and will be with us, always. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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