

9 December 2018

Peace
Philippians 4:1-9

As we consider Peace on the second Sunday of Advent, we turn to the letter to the Philippians, which Paul wrote while he was in prison awaiting death. We read Philippians 4, verses 1-9:

⁴ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. ² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ 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.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 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. 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.

A few years ago I drove by a church, one of those with a large sign in front that displays inspirational messages that you usually can't *quite* finish reading before you've driven past. You know the ones. But this time I got the whole message: *True peace is found only with Christ*. Now I don't want to be a Negative Nelly and trample all over someone else's moment of inspiration, but . . . is that true? I'm not sure it's possible to prove or disprove it scientifically – Where would you find a control group? What do you do? Add two tablespoons of Christ to each test subject, but give two of them a placebo Christ? See what I mean? Proof is problematic. But we can at least ask if this statement is consistent with our own observations. If it is true that peace is only found with Christ, then we would expect Christians to consistently display more peace in their lives and relationships than do atheists or followers of other religions. Has that been your experience?

Yeah, that's a bit problematic too, isn't it? But, really, how are we supposed to tell, anyway? How *do* we measure peace? How do we even define it? Well, our scripture today offers several different ways to understand peace. Paul starts off where most of us do – understanding peace as the absence of conflict. That's the definition we saw in our earlier reading from Isaiah 11 – the passage often called “The Peaceable Kingdom” – which describes predators and prey living together without killing. And, when we pray for World Peace, that's what we're thinking, isn't it? “Please help us stop shooting each other?” For Paul, it's even more specific than that: he's trying to make peace in a church squabble. He speaks directly to two women: *I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord* (v. 2). Now Paul doesn't mention what started this internal strife, but fortunately we know the source of the conflict, from Eusebius'

history of the early church. It seems that one year Euodia and Syntache were put at adjacent tables for the Philippian church's annual Christmas Tea . . .

Okay, not really. Eusebius' history is nowhere near that interesting. But I'm 100% sure that this fight started with something like that. Aren't you? I gave that situation, but I then didn't have to say another word, did I? You could all fill in the blanks from there. An uncharitable word spoken unwisely and overheard by the wrong person – an apology that was either not given or not received – and we're off and running. I don't know if I should be relieved or depressed to read that this sort of snippy inter-church warfare has been going on since the *very first generation*. At any rate, this is where Paul starts, and if we're going to look for a definition of peace, the lowest possible bar for a church – the Meets-Minimum-Qualifications level – is to not be horrible to each other. Paul deals with this by saying, "Remember how we worked together in the gospel? Can we just focus on that and have *one mind* again?"

But Paul does move on from this barely adequate understanding of peace to something deeper: a sort of peace that is built on trust in God. *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (v. 6). When we put aside our anxieties, take our fears and ruffled feelings and troubles directly to God and leave them in God's care, then *the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus* (v.7). "Peace that surpasses all understanding," to me at least, implies a peace that does not depend on circumstances. It's not hard to understand peaceful feelings in someone in a hammock on a warm summer day. Peace that is beyond understanding is peace that we hold on to – or, rather, that continues to hold on to us – when there is no earthly reason that we should be peaceful. For instance, when we're in jail awaiting execution, like Paul was. And that sounds great, doesn't it? Being peaceful no matter what? Just one thing: how do we get there? I mean, "let go and let God" is easy to say (especially to other people), but it's not so easy to do. How *do* you just "let it go"? If only someone would write a song about that.

You do it by not trying to do it. That is, you find peace by not looking for peace. I know that sounds strange, but this is actually true of many things. There are certain things that simply cannot be achieved by trying to achieve them, and these tend to be some of the most valuable things of all. A good example is patience. Ever tried to force yourself to be patient? How'd that work? No, patience is not achieved by effort but rather develops naturally in the lives of those who face difficulties with honesty and determination and faith. Another thing in this category – things that cannot be achieved by our own efforts – is love. You can't make yourself love someone, any more than you can make someone love you. Instead, you *discover* that you love someone – often long after everyone else is aware of it. Or, again, take happiness. Setting out to achieve personal happiness is a sure-fire way to be miserable. Happiness is not a thing that we decide to have. If that were the case, we'd all be happy. Yes, some of our choices can influence our happiness, but the choice to be happy is not one of those. A few years ago, a book came out, written by a team of Christian counselors. It was called *Happiness Is a Choice*, thus implying that if we aren't happy it's our own fault. On behalf of all my friends who go through their lives managing their depression one step, one strategy, at a time, let me just say this: not buying that

book is also a choice. No, happiness is like patience and love in that it is not a thing that we achieve by sheer force of will, but a thing that we discover along the way.

The peace that surpasses understanding is like that. We don't acquire peace, or achieve it. We grow into it by gradual stages, often without realizing it's happening, as we focus on other things. Like what? What things? Let's look back at Philippians: *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* (v. 8). Look for what is just, noble, fair, compassionate, and courageous in others and in the world around you. This isn't just "think happy thoughts," Pollyanna playing the Glad Game. Paul is not saying to ignore what is prejudiced, petty, unfair, cruel, and cowardly in our world. But he is doing something profound. In this verse, he turns our attention outward. When you focus on these things, you are looking beyond yourself. That's the important shift. If I set out to seek "the peace that surpasses understanding," I'm looking for it for myself. It's a thing I want. But if I'm looking at what is true, honorable, just, pure, and so on, I'm looking at the goodness *around* me. I'm looking at the compassion that is shown by someone else, the courage that another has displayed, the integrity that shows through the life of a neighbor, and when our eyes are lifted from our own needs and desires and feelings, then and only then do we open ourselves to the kind of peace that Paul was talking about. Think for a moment about the person you have known who most exemplifies peace, the kind of peace you would like to have. Now, notice that that person is also the least self-centered person you've ever known.

How do you find peace? By looking beyond yourself for all that is beautiful, both in the world and in those around us. This doesn't *achieve* peace, but it opens the door through which peace can shyly steal inside. You may not notice that it's happening, but those around you will. You will find people seeking out your company, warming themselves in the peacefulness of your presence. And even then you may not realize that you have peace, because in the end peace is not a thing that can be had. It is not a thing at all, but a manner. It is not a purpose but a practice. It is not something you do, but it is the way you do everything.

So, is true peace found only with Christ? Yeah, no. I'm not ready to say that. But what I *will* say is that there is more peace possible for Christians than we Christians have been availing ourselves of, going back at least as far as Euodia and Syntyche. And that's a shame, because we even know where to look for it: beyond ourselves. Wherever there is goodness, compassion, honor, excellence, and beauty – think on those things.

A final word: "The Peace of Wild Things," by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.