

sermon-10/12/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Do Not Worry”  
Phil. 4:1-9  
By Jim Patten

Boy are we in need of some good news! I don't know about you, but everywhere I turn these days, life is either irritating or frightening. Just getting to work is a hassle. What should take me only twelve to fifteen minutes takes sometimes forty minutes because of all the road work and detours.

And then when I get to the church I am faced with more inconveniences. While I am thrilled with how the remodeling has enhanced our worship space, remodeling always seems to cause its own set of frustrations. Trying to figure out storage space, where we will hold coffee hour, what rooms are available for church school classes and all the other events that go on in a healthy and active church, is just an exhausting juggling act. And don't get me started on permits!

The economic crises in this country and that is sweeping the world has us all shaken. Fear has gripped the market place and our financial institutions. It has been an education for me to see how much Wall Street is controlled by psychology. When fear and distrust get on a roll, it is hard to turn things around.

So we turn to scripture hoping for a word of hope, for some good news. Our Philippians passage does not start out all that well. We read about two women, Euodia and Syntyche who are bickering. Paul can't seem to end his letter to this beloved church without calling out these two women for their inability to get along with each other.

When we realize Paul's letters were read to the entire church when they received them, we can begin to see how embarrassing this must have been for Euodia and Syntyche. While it is nice to know that women had leadership roles in the early church, it is sad to see that even these new churches were plagued with in-fighting bad enough the participants needed to be called on the carpet in this public way.

Before we despair of ever hearing any good news, our scripture passage moves on to words that feel like such a breath of fresh air. Rejoice, for God is near. Do not worry about anything, but pray, with thanksgiving, and peace will guard your hearts. And, finally, think on positive things like whatever is true, or honorable, or worthy of praise and God's peace will descend on your hearts.

We need to hear those words like someone dying of thirst in the desert needs a cup of cool water. Philippians, chapter four, is God's gift to the church in this very trying time when things seem to be falling apart.

It reminds us we dare not be driven by fear no matter how bad the economy gets. To let fear drive how we think, how we make decisions, how we act is a terrible mistake. When we react out of fear we make all kinds of bad decisions. We are tempted to horde what

we have. We find it difficult to trust anyone. We can be greedy. Anger can get the better of us.

Almost as bad as fear is a kind of chronic worry or anxiety about our lives. It can lead to being paralyzed and even to depression. Paul tells the Philippians, don't worry, God is near, pray. Turn to God and pour out your hearts. Ask God for what you need. "Let your requests be made known to God."

If we are to have an authentic relationship with God, we need to be honest with our needs. But, Paul says, while our prayers involve supplication, they should not all be just gimme, gimme, gimme. He writes, "but in everything by prayer and supplication **with thanksgiving** let your requests be made known to God."

Paul is reminding us we should not feel bad about asking God for what we need. Our asking, however, needs to be in the context of being thankful for what we have been given. No matter how bad it gets, we have been given so much, especially in this part of the world. Focusing on thanksgiving is an antidote to being anxious.

Then comes the most surprising turn of events. One would think that Paul would say if you honestly pray to God and let God know what you need, your prayers will be answered. But that is not what Paul says. He says pray, with thanksgiving, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The answer to prayer is peace.

The way to deal with worry is not getting what we want so we don't worry about it anymore. Of course, getting what we want is nice, but it is finally not what heals our worrying. We usually just find we need something else. It is peace, God's peace, that finally heals our anxiety.

The kind of peace Paul is talking about is a sturdy kind of peace. He even uses a military image! God's peace will guard our hearts and minds. This is not a wimpy peace. This is not a naïve peace that encourages us to childish hopes when things get grim. This is a peace that protects us. It cannot be fully explained, meaning it is out of our control. We don't own this peace, nor is it a peace at our beck and call. It is a gift from God that comes from a mature prayer life.

Finally, Paul says, thoughts matter. We read a book by that name in our adult class last year. In that book the author, Mary Funk, says that learning to identify those thoughts that swirl around inside us is a Christian discipline.

She goes on to say that the early desert monastics said that in order to grow in faith we needed to renounce certain things. One of those things was mindless thoughts. Mindless thoughts lead to sin. When we train our thoughts we end up being able to be more hospitable and open to service. The goal of training our thoughts is a mind at peace that can confront the chaos, confusion, and noise all around.

Paul says if you want to train your thoughts, be careful what you think about. “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.”

I know in my life there is a tape playing inside my head full of thoughts. When that tape plays negative thoughts, when I beat up on myself for all the dumb things I do or say, when I dwell on my frustrations and anger and fear, I am in big trouble. Sometimes the thoughts swirling around my mind and heart are so unconscious I hardly even notice them. I suspect that is true for most people.

Paul reminds us to pay attention to our thoughts, even the subtle ones we might not notice unless we really focus on our inner life. Then we need to discipline ourselves to think on things that are life giving and affirming. It will take practice. It might even be a good way to start each day, meditating on those things even if only for even a brief time.

My friends, there is no magical solution to worry, fear, and chronic anxiety. Sometimes medication is appropriate when our thoughts lead to deep depression. Even if we are not depressed, we know this is not an easy time to live through, and it may get tougher before it gets easier. How we live through these tough times, the decisions we make, whether we give into fear, are all critical to our faith journey.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi. These were not empty words of hope coming from someone who did not know suffering. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . .The Lord is near.” We need those words.  
Amen