

sermon-12/13/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“An Antidote to Worry”
Phil. 4:4-8

“Rejoice...again I will say Rejoice.” This is the third Sunday of Advent and there is no getting around it is all about joy. In fact, this is traditionally Joy Sunday. The signature scripture for this Sunday is our passage in Philippians.

At first reading it does sound a bit overly optimistic and even Pollyannaish. It reminds me of a popular song several years back-“Don’t Worry, Be Happy!” But then we remember where Paul was when he wrote this to the church at Philippi. He was in prison. And the Church he was writing to had the typical bickering and dissension issues found in many modern churches.

This letter was not optimistically naïve or shallow. It was not written by some smug Christian who had never experienced anything more traumatic than a hangnail. The circumstances surrounding this letter gives it weight. We can trust the joy he urges the Church to express.

The fact of the matter is, Christians have trusted Paul in this passage. It has had an enormous impact on the Church down through the years. Parts of it are often read at funeral services. Several of the phrases have captured the hearts of those going through tough times. If one wants to prepare for Christmas, if one wants to do some spiritual work during Advent, this is a great passage to ponder.

These five verses are packed with important words or phrases. Paul talks about joy, gentleness, God’s presence, worry, prayer, thanksgiving and peace. There is a deep connection between some of these terms. Trying to figure out those connections can be valuable work during our Advent preparation.

Let’s look briefly at a couple of those terms. Joy is a deeper, more interesting term than happiness. Happiness feels so dependent on circumstances, many of which are out of our control. We are happy when life is going well, when good things fall into our laps. But happiness is vulnerable to anything that might lead to frustrating complications, to anything that threatens our false sense of invulnerability, let alone any of life’s tragedies that throw us into grief.

Joy is a deeper term. It is a state of mind and heart that carries us through all those disruptions that can cause happiness to flee. For Christians, gospel joy, as one commentator put it, is always shared joy. It is something we can only experience in community. Happiness feels a whole lot more like an individual emotion. We can share it, to be sure, but it is just fine to be happy alone.

Next there is that surprising term: gentleness. Other translations use the word magnanimity. Paul is talking about things like being considerate, tender-hearted, generous in forgiving others and overlooking insult or injury, being unselfish, rising

above pettiness and meanness. Those are all terms the dictionary uses to define those words. Apparently it is those attitudes that define being a Christian for Paul.

Finally there is that wonderful phrase “the peace of God. . . will guard your hearts. . .” Literally Paul is saying the peace of God will stand sentry over our hearts. It will protect our hearts. It is a military image Paul is drawing on here. And it is surprising. God’s peace is so strong it can protect us. No wonder it surpasses all our understanding.

Peace as a sentry is not the only concept that surpasses all our understanding. Many of us read his admonition to not worry about anything as just plain impossible. You might as well ask some of us not to breathe. Being worried, being anxious, waiting for the other shoe to drop is second nature for many of us.

Some have tried to make this a little easier to do by saying Paul is really only talking about not sweating the small stuff. Only worry about the essentials. The trouble is what some may call small stuff in your life may feel like an essential to you, and vice versa.

So, we are stuck with trying to come to terms with our worries. This is important because worry and gentleness are connected. If we are worried, we are probably much less able to be gentle. We are more brittle and defensive. We are self protective and sometimes even aggressive. Instead of the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds, we take on that task ourselves with attitudes that are far from gentle.

That is all well and good, but how do we come to terms with our worries? Paul says we do that by praying, by being aware of God’s presence and by what thoughts occupy our heads.

He says pray about what is on your mind and heart. Don’t be shy about supplication, about being honest with what you need. But, he adds, pray with thanksgiving. Pray with gratitude.

I don’t know if you have been reading our Advent booklet, but if you haven’t you are missing a real treat. Someone in our lectionary class pointed to an entry in that booklet by MaryAnn Eschbach for the second Sunday of Advent. MaryAnn wrote about the importance of gratitude. She talked about how gratitude and grief are not incompatible. It was a very moving entry.

When life gets tough, when we pour out our hearts to God in supplication, we need to remember that prayer without gratitude may not lift our anxiety. For our prayers to touch our worries they need to quiet our minds and help us focus on God’s presence as God comes to us in others. When we can see God in those who love us and show us kindness, we will see what MaryAnn is saying about being overwhelmed with gratitude.

We will find it hard to pray with thanksgiving during the really hard times in our lives if we have not practiced that in those times when things are going well. Helpful prayer is like a muscle. If we don’t exercise our muscles, they atrophy and are useless when we

really need them. So too with prayer. Advent is a time to think about working on our prayer life, however we choose to pray.

Finally, thoughts matter. Perhaps some of you will remember an adult class several years ago where we read a book called *Thoughts Matter*. What we think deeply affects what we feel. It can have an enormous influence on how anxious we are. One commentator says being careful about what thoughts fill our heads is all about mental hygiene. That is exactly what Paul is getting at in verse eight.

Paul says focus on what is just, true, pure, and honorable. It is a discipline. It takes work. But the end result will mean we have a better handle on our worries. So many of us have this little running dialogue in our heads. If we were to listen carefully to that dialogue we would find it is not about what is true, pure, or honorable. It is probably more about justifying ourselves for what we have done, or beating ourselves up for the stupid things we say or do. Sometimes that voice is so subtle we don't even notice it.

Such a dialogue can lead us away from gratitude and make us anxious, fearful, defensive, and grumpy. We could end up like someone once described the proverbial New Englander as one "who fears that someone, somewhere might be having a good time." How dare they be joyful when we are not.

As we get ever closer to Christmas and celebrating the Joy to the World the birth of the baby Jesus causes, let's continue our Advent preparation. Let us remember God is near. Let us be gentle with ourselves and others. Let us pray our hearts out, but with thanksgiving as well as supplication. And let's give up trying to guard our own hearts with our defensiveness or our anxious worries and let the peace of God stand sentry over our hearts and minds instead. Amen