

JULY 2, 2023 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Creator God, Maker of the heavens and of this earth, we sing of your love, we praise you for your presence with us, we long for your peace. And yet... we are worried and distracted by many things. And so we come to you God, in all our humanity, acknowledging our need for you and for one another. You've called us to walk the path of faithful discipleship in a world that beckons us in directions that can cloud our focus and lead us off the path. We confess, God that the way to your peace is to stay focused on the ways and the wisdom of Jesus.

We know that Jesus spent much of his time tapping in to the source which is you – offering his deepest and most heartfelt concerns, trusting in you for all that he needed. And so, following that example, we bring to you our concerns and the desires of our hearts.

O God, we pray for our children – those who are close to us and the children of the world. We thank you for the birth of August Edward to Ronda's daughter, Maty. Be with this family as this little one grows and develops. Be with Maty as she mothers August and his sister and at the same time has to tend to her own health concerns. Be with Ronda as she anticipates traveling to be with them after Maty's surgery in a couple of weeks. We pray also for Braxton as he anticipates more medical care and procedures. Be with him and his family in the coming days. Wrap your arms of love and healing and comfort around these families, God. In these moments we bring thoughts of others we know and love who need your healing... (silence)

God, we pray your blessing on the group that will travel to Kansas City this week for the denominational Convention. Be with each of us in our various roles as we experience the gifts of being together with others in the broader church. We pray for safe travels, for growth and learning, for the presence and movement of your Spirit in our midst as we worship and learn together.

Thank you God for the opportunity to gather each Wednesday evening for these past 5 weeks to share and discuss Raylene's book. It was a rich experience and we're grateful.

We thank you God for the harvest, for safety in the process, for the practice of working the ground and producing grain and fruit, both beautiful and practical. Be with us as we continue to learn about and embrace the ideas of what it means to tend and care for the land.

Beyond the walls of this building, beyond our homes and our fields and our towns, we pray for this world. We pray for leaders and citizens, for those who live in relative freedom – that they may respect it and use it wisely – and for those whose lives are bound by oppression, poverty or violence. We are all your creatures, loved and created in your image. Give us big hearts, generous spirits and deep souls that trust in you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Generous God, we consider it a privilege to bring our gifts to you today.

We present these offerings with thanksgiving and joy, gently releasing a portion of our resources back to you.

Let your peace fill us so that we are not anxious about anything as we show concern for others and rejoice in you always. Amen.

LIVING IN PEACE WITH OUR HEARTS AND MINDS – PASTOR CALEB YODER Philippians 4:4-13

INTRODUCTION

Over this summer, our worship and preaching have focused on peace, but maybe not what we typically associate with the word “peace.”

We might think first about wars and refugee crises, or violent crime, mass shootings, our culture’s fixation on violence as threats to peace. Or maybe you might think of the immense inequality in our country and especially around the globe as a lack of peace.

Or maybe you think about deep interpersonal conflict; broken relationships that leave deep hurt, shame, or scars as a lack of peace. All of this is important, and we will get to the interpersonal dimension – peace between people.

But so far, we’ve been addressing what it means to have peace in relationship with God and peace within ourselves. These dimensions of peace are very much connected with how we work for peace in our relationships and in the world.

It’s true that peace is kind of a favorite word of Mennonites, and for good reason – the Greek word for “peace” appears in the New Testament 90 times. By comparison, the Greek words for “salvation” appear 51 times, though the verb for “save” or “heal” is more common. The word “shalom” shows up in the Old Testament 227 times.

It’s possible to give way too much importance to how often words appear. Often the NT writers are using different words to talk about the same reality. I only mean to make the point that “peace” in all its dimensions is God’s desire and dream for a redeemed and thriving humanity.

We turn Philippians 4 for more insight into what it looks like to have peace within one’s heart and mind. This passage is among the most well-known in the New Testament and is rich with wisdom. Let’s look at the related themes that Paul mentions, all of which pertain with finding peace within ourselves.

REJOICE

First, Paul tells the Philippians to be glad, to rejoice.

In the congregation that I learned to know in Honduras, it seemed there was constantly pressure to be happy in worship. Partly, worship was an opportunity for them to forget their troubles and find emotional connection with God.

But I don't think Paul is trying to shame anyone into rejoicing. Paul is not asking us to ignore the real struggles in our lives or in the world.

Nor is it true that everything was going splendidly for Paul. Paul wrote this letter while in prison. The Philippians weren't likely living comfortable lives either. Many were either poor or enslaved. They had few forms of security.

Paul says to rejoice "in the Lord," which is a reason separate from circumstances. There's no need to allow our challenges to dominate our thinking to the degree that we are robbed of any reason for joy.

You have permission to experience joy, no matter what pain life has put you through.

"Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people," Paul says. In other words, you owe it to others to have an open heart, to not allow whatever pain you have to prevent you from relating to others with openness and grace.

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

Paul's next major command is to "not be anxious about anything." This is the same word that also appears in Matthew 6, where Jesus says, "Do not worry about your life..."

The meaning of the word is not specifically out-of-control thoughts or the feeling of anxiety. Anxiety as an emotional state is part of being human. Sometimes we will feel anxiety – it's an adaptation that made our ancestors more alert when there was a threat.

The root meaning of the Greek word is care or concern. In fact, there are times that the New Testament commends "having concern." In the same letter, Paul praised Epaphroditus as a person "who genuinely cares" for the well-being of those in the Philippian Church. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that members of the body of Christ have the same care for one another.

In these examples, the concern is other-focused. Concern for your own well-being is not wrong, but yet, being self-absorbed, taking ourselves too seriously, worrying about what could go wrong, or ignoring the struggles of others because you are caught up in your own – all these things rob us of interior peace that God means for us to have.

Once again, I don't think Paul is trying to shame anyone for feeling anxiety about real concerns. Of course, we face real challenges, struggles, and grief in life, and we have good reasons to feel anxious.

But in an ultimate sense, our faith is that the goodness of God undergirds reality and holds us. We have permission to be free from worry – at least take a worry holiday. Take a day off and

embrace the attitude of “Don’t worry, be happy” – which was actually not written by Bob Marley.

For Paul, this encouragement to “have no concern” is not a denial of difficult realities. There are things that are genuinely bad or tragic. This encouragement is based on the affirmations of faith in a God who is bigger than all that is not right.

“Bring your requests to God with thanksgiving.” There is a difference between gratitude for a thing and gratitude in a thing. When something is truly difficult or sad, there’s no reason to be grateful *for* it. Nor do I think we should regard everything as God’s doing.

But we can practice gratitude *in* all times and circumstances.

Two practices commend themselves here. One is to recall the things we are grateful for. I have a reminder on my phone to write down something I am grateful for each day. Most days, I don’t feel a perceptible difference, but in the long run, I’m reminded of the goodness in life, and at the very least can’t have days that feel completely bad. The bad never needs to be the whole story.

Another practice I’ve started trying to incorporate is turning worries into prayer. You don’t have to have extra time, or be a pious person.

Every time you are conscious of worrying, rather than trying to repress the thought or shoo it away, acknowledge it in the presence of God as something that is troubling you, and ask for strength, for a way through it, or invite God to lessen that burden.

PEACE OF GOD

Paul’s assurance is that the “peace of God that exceeds all understanding” will guard our hearts and minds. Many people understand this “peace that surpasses understanding,” as some kind of incredible, mystical experience.

I do believe many people have had these experiences, but they are relatively rare, which makes this promise not very accessible for most of daily life.

Another way to hear this phrase is to say that you don’t have to grasp or understand God’s peace. You just have to trust that it is there holding us up when we feel weak, tired, hurt, or burdened.

The CEB says that God’s peace will keep our “hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.” Other translations say “will guard your hearts and minds.” This is military language – like the way that an armed contingent guards people. But instead of our sense of security resting on the potential exercise of violence, the security Paul talks about rests on the ineffable peace of God.

PONDER ALL THAT IS EXCELLENT

The next piece of encouragement in this passage is to ponder all things that are excellent – all that is true, all that is holy, just, pure, lovely, or worthy of praise.

The words in this sentence isn't specifically Jewish or Christian language. Pagans would have used similar language to describe good things.

I know from experience that my mind can have a life of its own. All kinds of thoughts and tape reels play in my head, and it doesn't take much stress for brain to select an accessible negative tape reel to play.

It takes some effort to be aware of what is going on, take a step back from the negative chatter, and re-center myself on what is true, what is a bedrock, what makes for hope.

Once again, there's no denial of genuine struggle, challenge, or pain. It's a matter of what we choose to put at the center of our attention and give ultimate importance to.

SECRET OF CONTENTMENT

The next verses, starting with verse 10, are where Paul more or less thanks the Philippian church for sending material aid to him.

Paul has a rather interesting way of thanking them, which from the point of view of our culture might not seem like much of a thank you. I won't get into that here.

Paul gratefully receives whatever help is offered, but he also says that he has learned the secret of being self-sufficient or content in whatever the circumstances. Whatever he is going through, whether he has more than enough or whether he is humbled or lowered, he counts on the strength of Christ.

The popular verse is "I can do all things through the one who strengthens me." People apply it to all manner of things, including athletic feats. But Paul is not saying that faith in Jesus gives one special powers or helps one win. The word "do" is not there at all in the original, so one has to fill in the blank from the preceding sentence.

Paul's actual meaning would be something more like, "I am able to persevere through all things through the strength of Christ. No matter what happens, I am enough and I have the internal resources I need." We underestimate the resources we have within ourselves, which I like to think of as the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

Viktor Frankl was a psychologist who spent time in several concentration camps, and observed what these terrible atrocities did to human beings. Such dehumanization did in fact cause many prisoners to despair, to turn on their fellow prisoners, or to lose human affection and be led only by survival instinct.

But Frankl also observed notable exceptions, people who maintained hope and demonstrated generosity at their own expense. What made the difference? Some people were able to retain their human dignity – that was something the Nazis could not take away.

"It is this spiritual freedom – which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful," he wrote. "When we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves."

Each of us has the power to choose our way through challenges, and our ability to find peace within our circumstances is connected to our ability to join God's work of peacebuilding in the world.

In fact, precisely what keeps us going is having a sense that there's a reason you are here. We find that through relationship and compassionate action.

It's not wrong to seek to change your circumstances, especially when it comes to leaving a situation that is unhealthy or abusive. But many times in life we don't get to decide whether we consent or not. Life happens either way. How do we not allow this to steal our joy?

Again, the practice I'd encourage is not to feel bad for worrying but simply to mindfully acknowledge the worry and make it a prayer for strength. Don't hesitate to find the trustworthy spaces where you can be honest and vulnerable about whatever is on your heart.

Let us find hope and faith in God's love which is at the bottom of reality, and which we cannot truly comprehend, possess or control. Let us remember the truths that ground us and center us on what is important.

We are flawed and loved. We are in this thing together. We don't have to play by the same games our culture pressures us to. Christ is enough and therefore we are enough.

Pain, grief, or challenge do not undo us, because Jesus experienced all these things before being raised to life. – God's peace be with each one of you.

BENEDICTION

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Now and always. Amen