

Lectionary 28 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 11, 2020

Philippians 4:1-9

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“If there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise.” Paul says. Any virtue, anything valuable, anything worth celebrating. If there is anything of the kind. *Think about these things.* That’s our second reading today. *If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

It’s hard to ignore these words in these times. There is so much bad in the world right now. And worse than that, the decent behavior that even people who disagree would nevertheless maintain, that behavior has eroded.’ Decency, prudence, and wisdom are in short supply. And when they occur, they are not admired. There’s been a coarsening of our culture that has been underway for a very long time. It accelerated in the last few years. And now, in pandemic, while we are living in isolations of various kinds, when we need understanding and community and patience more than ever, our social and cultural fabric has almost completely disintegrated. *If there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

Paul’s words to the Philippians today have been called “the power of positive thinking.” I wouldn’t call it that. Positive thinking is when you face a bad thing with a winning attitude. Positive thinking is saying, “Yes, I can.” “Yes, we can.” “Sí, se puede.” There’s value to that. Facing a bad situation with confidence is sometimes courage, and is sometimes foolish. But that’s what I think positive thinking means. Paul is talking about focus. The word “mind” occurs in this little letter of Philippians seven times. Twice in today’s reading. It’s a word that Paul uses frequently, but more frequently in this little four-chapter letter to the Philippians than anywhere else. Paul seems attuned to how our thoughts shape our character. He encourages us to turn our minds to higher things. *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.* Paul did not know anything about evolutionary biology. But today, we know that humans are hard-wired to be anxious and to be afraid and to be angry. Human beings reached the top of the evolutionary ladder because our negative emotions keep us alive. If you’re always on the lookout for enemies, if you react immediately to threats, if you’re good at hiding, you live longer. In the jungle, or in the forest, or on the savannah, or at the coast. You may not believe that humans have evolved, but for those of us who do, there’s evidence that evolution has predisposed us to negative emotions.

And so the mind that Paul urges us to have is a mind that focuses on the higher things, the better things. Not ignoring all the bad, not excusing it. But to turn our minds intentionally toward what

is good and noble. Paul has you in mind, and me in mind— he has individuals in mind. But he also knows that the human propensity for negativity causes us to neglect the things that deserve recognition and affirmation. *Whatever is commendable. If there is anything worthy of praise.* Paul isn't just suggesting that you'll be a happier person if you validate the good in the world. The good in the world is often neglected and overlooked, and it needs validation.

Paul is concerned about conflict among the Philippians. This section of the letter names Euodia and Syntyche. Two things about these women. These are the hardest to pronounce names in the Bible. Nobody knows how to say "Syntyche." The second thing is that these are female leaders. Several of Paul's letters mention female leaders. It was a reality in Paul's congregations. Here they are mentioned as his colleagues, along with another man named Clement. Something to remember. And what does Paul urge Euodia and urge Syntyche to do? *To be of the same mind.*

When the holiday season comes around, our congregation has an Advent wreath with four candles. Perhaps you have one in your home. One of our four candles is pink. That's an outdated artifact related to third Sunday of Advent, called "Gaudete," which is Latin for "rejoice." For about a thousand years, Paul's words in today's second reading were read or sung at the beginning of worship on the third Sunday of Advent. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. I don't know how Christians decided that a pink candle would best symbolize joy, but I guess pink is better than brown or black. But today, we have that verse in its context. In the preceding chapter, Paul started in on joy, saying, "rejoice in the Lord" [Philippians 3:1] and now he repeats it, and repeats it once more. *Again I will say, Rejoice.* It's not joy in what's around us. It's joy in the Lord. And it's a joy that can be constructive. Turning our attention to what is good and true. Validating what is good and true. And lifting our hearts and our voices up and away from the base emotions and reptilian brain that so often prevail in human hearts and in human relations. Indeed, our final words in worship today will be: *Lift up your hearts! Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again, I say, Rejoice.*

You and I live in a time and place of great conflict. And a culture that is primed for anger and the demeaning of just about everyone and everything. Paul's words today urge us to attend to higher things, more noble things, and to affirm the good things that are so easily overlooked. To lift up our hearts, and rejoice in the Lord. Amen.