

Psalm 1
Philippians 4:1-9

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 11, 2020

Make It a Habit

Introduction to the Psalm

In this first of 150 Psalms, the people hear about the importance of meditating upon God's Word. Thereby will they know true happiness and bear much fruit. Listen to these words from Psalm 1...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear Paul draw together a number of themes that run throughout the letter. The Apostle is in prison, writing to perhaps his favorite church. Our focus will be upon his final exhortation, where he lays out for the Philippians those things upon which they should concentrate their thinking. Listen to these words from Philippians 4:1-9...

Sermon

Have you heard the story about Joe, the perpetual worrier?

One day Joe's friend Bill was walking down Main Street when he saw something that really amazed him. Joe was on the far side of the road and whistling away. Bill could hardly believe his eyes and ears.

When he crossed over and spoke with Joe, he asked him outright: "Joe, what on earth has happened to you? I've never seen a happier man!"

Joe replied, "It's great, Bill! I haven't worried now for several weeks.

"That's super, Joe. How did you manage it?" inquired Bill.

"Well," said Joe, "it was easy! I've hired a man to do all the worrying for me!"

"What?" gasped Bill. "you've hired a man to do it for you! I've never heard of anyone doing that before. How much does he charge you?"

"A thousand dollars a week," said Joe, with a smile on his face.

"That's a lot of money! How could you possibly raise a thousand bucks a week to pay him?" wondered Bill out loud.

"That's *his* worry!" replied Joe.

In our lesson Paul declares:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ. (4:6-7)

Here in chapter 4 Paul tells the members of the church in Philippi to “stand firm in the Lord.” Christ is like our center of gravity, and the Holy Spirit grounds us in his being, so that our movement into God’s future is neither frantic nor fearful. We need Sabbath rest to remind us of the rest to be found throughout the week. We need the peace of God to enable us to deal with the trials and tribulations that come our way. We need God’s Word so that we aren’t habitually nostalgic for the past nor anxious about a future we cannot see. And given all that is happening in our world today, we certainly need this grounding.

Remember, the Apostle is not writing from a palatial palace, he’s writing from prison, probably in Rome. He is on death row. How can he say, “Don’t worry”?

It’s hard to imagine not being anxious about anything. For most of us have our fair share of anxieties: worries about finances, job, health, family members, school, the upcoming election, just to name a few. A poem says it well:

It’s not the work but the worry
That makes the world grow old,
That numbers the years of its children,
Ere half their story is told,
That weakens their faith in heaven
And the wisdom of God's dear plan,
It’s not the work but the worry
that breaks the heart of man. (Unknown)

But what Paul exhorts us to do here in Philippians is to turn our worries into prayers. No matter how small the matter might seem, we can bring it to God. No matter how insurmountable the problem may appear, Paul teaches us to approach God’s throne of grace with confidence that we will find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrew 4:15)

What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!
 What a privilege to carry Everything to God in prayer!
 Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,
 All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer!
 ~"What a Friend We Have in Jesus," v. 1 by Joseph Scriven

Elizabeth Cheney wrote these words in a poem:

Said a robin to a sparrow:
 'I should really like to know
 Why these anxious human beings
 Rush around and worry so.'

Said the sparrow to the robin:
 'I suppose that it must be
 That they have no heavenly Father
 Such as cares for you and me!'

To be sure, instructions about turning worry into prayer may present a challenge to many Christians today. Like those of us who have made a virtue of worry. Like those of us who have developed a habit of worry. This new habit—of turning worry into prayer—will take some time and effort. It's been said that it takes three weeks to establish a new habit, though it can surely take much longer. But is worth the effort, in terms of our own well-being, and the well-being of those around us.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard
 your hearts and your minds in Christ. (4:7)

Then in verse 8 Paul instructs us on where to focus our attention:

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.

It is said that the human mind allowed to wander, will always set itself on something.
 Paul in writing to the members of the church in Philippi calls them to set their minds on the right
 things—on things that will build up, encourage, strengthen.

In his book *Your Body Doesn't Lie*, Dr. John Diamond discusses the relationship between thoughts and the activity of the thymus gland. The thymus gland lies just beneath the upper part of the breast bone. It helps fight disease, helps young bodies grow, and gives energy. Diamond says:

Find a person whose thymus point tests weak and have him think of someone he loves, or of something pleasant, such as lying in the sun on the beach. Whatever it is, the image strengthens the thymus at once. Now ask the person to think of someone he hates, or of something unpleasant, such as being ill. The thymus will return to its weak state.

Former pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Greenville, Newman Faulconer, in his retirement years would come to the McCarter Church where I was pastor. Once a month on a Wednesday evening he would present a slide show of places he had visited in the United States and abroad. I recall his saying that when he, as a pastor, was talking with a parishioner who was depressed, he would often recommend taking up the hobby of photography. Because taking pictures would cause the mind to look at things that were lovely: a smiling person, a blooming flower, a scenic mountain, a beautiful church. And the effect would tend to lift one's spirit.

A number of years ago Hazel and I discovered the Foothills Philharmonic Orchestra, a group of volunteer musicians who perform concerts free to the public six times a year. Their programs featured Beethoven, Shubert, Berlioz, and the annual Pops concert. We found the music a blessing to cherish. Since the new coronavirus, their concerts have been discontinued. And we miss them.

The truth is that what we put into our minds influences what comes out of our mouths—garbage in, garbage out. Paul instructs us to think on things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, anything excellent or worthy of praise. So consider what you are putting into your minds through television, the internet, books, conversations, movies, and magazines. If there is something degrading, replace it with something wholesome.

In our Psalm this morning we have what has been called the first beatitude:

Blessed are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
 but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
 They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
 which yield their fruit in its season
 and their leaves do not wither.
 In all that they do, they prosper. (1:1-3)

There's a weekly article in the *Wall Street Journal* editorial section called "Houses of Worship." This Friday's article was written by Jewish Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, in recognition of the Jewish holiday Sim Chat Torah, or "The Joy of the Torah," which was observed yesterday, October 10. He writes:

The Torah scroll is the most sacred object of Jewish life and the centerpiece of its Sabbath service. Every week it is escorted from the dark. A portion is read in the synagogue, and the scroll is reverently returned to its place.

It is God's Word in the Torah that has enabled the Jewish people to survive in the face of much suffering and degradation. It is more than laws with all the do's and don't's. It is their friend. Especially now in the face of all around them that has changed, much of which for the worst.

And so we read and meditate upon God's Word, which of course for us includes God's Word become flesh in Jesus Christ. And we pray. Let us ask God to help us focus our minds upon what is good and pure. It may take some time, but it's a habit worth developing.

Then in verse 9 Paul says:

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.

It's not enough to hear or read God's Word, or even to know it well. We also need to put it into practice. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, who deceive themselves." (James 1:22)

What kind of things might Paul encourage contemporary believers to do? Well everyday works of kindness. Like providing gift cards to homeless school children from the proceeds of our Yard and Bake Sale. Like preparing hot soup for the woman who just lost her husband. Like calling someone who is sick or lonely. Sending a card. Offering a prayer.

In closing, hear the words of Scottish minister Alexander Maclaren:

Thoughts make deeds. Thoughts and deeds make character. Character makes destiny. If we have blessed thoughts in our hearts and minds, if they are our continual companions, then we will have a light within that will burn independently of externals."

My friends, we may not be able to hire someone to do our worrying for us, but we can make it a habit to meditate on God's Word and on things that build up. Things that nurture a quiet mind and a hopeful heart. A habit worth developing, through discipline, time, and prayer. With the sure promise that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.