

Isaiah 25:1-9
Philippians 4:1-9

18th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 1, 2023

Surpassing Peace

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning from the prophet Isaiah, we hear praise for God who has delivered his people from oppression. It is declared on this mountain (most likely Jerusalem) that God will make for all peoples a great feast, and death will be swallowed up forever. Listen to these words from Isaiah 25:1-9...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistles Lesson today Paul issues exhortations with special emphasis on unity, rejoicing, prayer, and the reassuring nature of God's peace. Listen to these words from Philippians 4:1-9...

Sermon

In the chapter preceding today's Lesson from Philippians, Paul uses the image of a race to picture the Christian life as one of constant movement into God's future. But here, in chapter 4 he begins his final exhortations to the Philippians quite differently: "Stand firm in the Lord!" Pressing forward and standing firm in one place—two different images that seem to contradict each other.

Perhaps the answer is in the prepositional clause, "in the Lord"—"Stand firm in the Lord." In the Lord, our forward movement can be compared to our constant movement on the surface of the earth. We are held firmly by gravity at the center, yet simultaneously spinning at tremendous speed, constantly in motion yet constantly at rest. Without Christ as our Center of

Gravity, this grounding in the settled presence of Christ among us, the depiction of the life of faith as a race quickly becomes frantic and chaotic.

Indeed, given the pace of most contemporary life, we certainly do not need more panicky activity. We need, rather, to rest in Christ's presence each day, neither longing for a past we cannot go back to or change, nor worrying about a future we cannot yet see. When we live in the present with Christ, we find that he carries us forward, yet at the same time there is always enough time for what truly needs to be done.

What needs to be done, in Paul's view, is to live by the promise that Christ *will* transform us, and *will* subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21). This promise has quite specific effects in the present. It issues in a call to reconciliation between church members in conflict (4:2-3). It nurtures habits of the heart to overcome worry (4:4-7) and habits of the mind that open us to the peace of God, which is indeed the presence of the God of peace (4:8-9).

First, Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche, women who are leaders in the church in Philippi, and who presently are at odds with each other. We know nothing else about them, nor about Clement. Nor do we know who is the "loyal companion" whom Paul asks to help restore harmony. What we do know is that they were valued fellow co-workers who had shared Paul's struggles.

We also know that Paul's plea for reconciliation draws on his earlier depiction of "the mind of Christ," in Philippians 2:1-5. "That we have in us, the same mind that was in Christ Jesus." Just as Paul generally exhorted the Philippians to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind," so now he brings it home in a specific situation of discord. He also lists Euodia and Syntyche among those "whose names are in the book of life." This is an unusual expression in Paul's letters, but its appearance here causes us to ponder the

way the hope of eternal life encourages us to be reconciled to our fellow Christians. After all, we will be spending a long time with them! Reconciliation.

Secondly, Paul instructs us to rejoice! Again, how surprising this is, coming from the confinement of a Roman prison from which Paul is writing. Part of the reason is that Paul expects the imminent return of Christ, who will put all things right. “The Lord is near.” But as we have seen throughout the letter, Paul also experiences in the present the nearness of God in Christ, even in his captivity in a Roman prison. So he calls us to rejoice.

And knowing that we are beset with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing, he tells us to pray in *everything*, bringing everything, no matter how trivial or how seemingly insurmountable, to the God who loves us. We will not likely achieve freedom from anxiety by our own efforts. In fact, the attempt may push the anxiety underground, where it can fester and lead to secret despair. But Christ will meet us in our place of worry. Therefore, God becomes for us the God whose peace “guards” our minds and hearts. Reconciliation. Rejoicing.

Thirdly, Paul tells us to focus our minds on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Is this just an exercise in positive thinking? Is it a Pollyanna denial of reality? Apart from the resurrection, such would indeed be the case. But Paul is holding two realities in view at the same time.

Where do we focus our attention on a daily basis? The news, which is often depressing. Health problems? Things we covet? Or do we focus on Jesus—the pioneer and perfecter of our faith? And then on the specifics that Paul lists: the true, the honorable, the pure, and so on.

Yes, there is the immediate reality of a world in which human beings are constantly at war somewhere, betraying one another, suppressing each other in order to get ahead. This was true of the Roman Empire, and it is true today. Every day we hear and see a culture that focuses

on what is false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, and shameful. Congress can't agree on a budget and kicks the can down the road, again and again, while our national debt grows by trillions of dollars. Looters run wild in major cities like Philadelphia. Drugs pour into the country from our southern border. We begin to think that to act hopefully in such a world is unrealistic.

But Paul also sees another reality, and it is the reality that holds the future. That is the reality of God's redemption, already here and still drawing near. Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental discipline. For such a discipline, we need to experience the counter reality of God's rule in the midst of tangible human relationships. Paul offers his own relationship with the Philippians as just such a counterweight to the temptation of despair and futile thinking. Let's focus our minds on Christ, and the things that are worthy of our attention.

Finally, once again Paul promises that the outcome of these habits of the heart and mind is a "peace that surpasses all understanding." Written from jail, by a man under threat of capital punishment at the hands of a brutal and corrupt regime, these are extraordinary promises. Rome was always at war somewhere on its borders. The so-called *Pax Romana* was anything but for Rome's subject peoples. Tacitus, a Roman senator who served in Rome's far-flung provinces, wrote bitterly, "They make a desolation and call it peace."

Paul's solution for worry is prayer:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7)

Someone said, "There is nothing too great for God's power; and nothing too small for his fatherly care." We can pray for others, and we can pray for ourselves. We can pray for forgiveness, and we can pray for guidance. We can pray for our church, and we can pray for our

country. We can pray with thanksgiving for our many blessings and most of all, for God's love for us in Christ.

And in praying this way Paul assures us that the peace of God will stand like a sentinel on guard upon our hearts and minds. It will be a peace that surpasses understanding.

My friends, Paul sees a different reality alongside the violence and duplicity of Rome. The small and struggling Christian congregation in the Roman colony of Philippi is itself a kind of "colony of hope," a separate city with a more powerful Lord who alone has defeated death. Confident, therefore, in the ultimate victory of the God of peace, he encourages us to have quiet minds and hopeful hearts. And one way we can do this is by coming to this table that he has prepared for us.

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