

## “Going Deeper: On being kind, reframing the inner narrative and a peace that doesn't make sense.”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



*Philippians 4:1-9*

*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 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. 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.*

Someone once told me that the Bible, sometimes, just seems to be a little bit too fluffy. There are passages about the Christian life that gives the impression that we are supposed to walk around being kind, generous, and joyful all the time, living in denial about the way the world actually is.

I was reminded on this interaction as I read this passage from Philippians where Paul writes:

Rejoice in the Lord, Always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Hearing these words without any context, you might get the impression that following Jesus is all about sunshine, happiness and rainbows all the time. It could come across as a little bit naive, or as a little bit too light, in this world where we deal with some really heavy stuff.

It seems a little light when we are trying to wrap our heads around yet another mass shooting, or yet another terrible wildfire, or the news we just got of lay-offs at work, or the anxiety we have of raising in child in this world where it seems the only way to be successful is to yell louder and more forcefully than everyone else.

In the midst this life that we live, which sometimes feels like it's almost too much to bear, it's hard to read things in the bible like: Rejoice in the Lord always, or do not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.

It's sometimes hard to hear words of peace, a peace which doesn't make sense when our lives feel like they are barely hanging on by a thread. So sometimes we dismiss these passages, as just a little bit too fluffy or not true to real life.

But, if we put these words in to context, if we remember the circumstances that surrounded this letter, they go from two dimensional to three, from lifeless to full of life, from fluffy and superficial to rich and robust.

See this passage comes from a letter written by a man named Paul, who was one of the first Christians. He was a man who was so moved by an encounter with God's unconditional love in Jesus that he gave his entire life to Christ, surrendering his will to follow Jesus.

This meant that Paul lived a hard life, like a crazy hard life. It was full of struggle, threats of violence, conflict and tension, he was shipwrecked, he was beaten up, and he was imprisoned, all for the sake of what he called the Gospel, the good news of God's unearned grace entering into our human story and saving us from ourselves. Paul was a man who knew the heaviness of the world and the heaviness of life.

In this letter he's writing from prison to his church family, one of the churches that he helped to start. He is writing to the church in Philippi, a Christian community which was made up of the poor, the weak and the marginalized. See the early Christian church wasn't comprised of the strongest and most powerful in society; it was a movement of women, children, slaves and undocumented immigrants. It was a community which was known for wanting all those who no one else wanted. These were people who walked with a limp, folks who knew what it meant to live on the edge, people of tremendous hope in desperate situations, the beloved community of God, the body of Christ, broken and blessed.

So, it's from this man and to these people that these inspired words arise: Rejoice, be kind, do not worry, pray, share with God and the peace which doesn't make any sense will be with you and will guard your hearts in Jesus. So, these words, which at first glance do seem a little bit naive to those who have seen some stuff go down in their life, they take on an entirely new understanding when you read between the lines.

You start to see that what Paul is getting at is this truth: **The spiritual life is about learning to be ok when things aren't ok. The spiritual life is about learning to be ok when things aren't ok.**

Spirituality, is not about transcending suffering or the heavy things in this life, nor is it about living in denial of these things. No, it's about naming them, claiming them, knowing them for what they are, incorporating them into our story, but not letting them have the last word.

It's like when you meet someone who is just so grounded, someone who's been through some stuff and you know that they have every right in the world to be angry, bitter, depressed or despairing, but they are the exact opposite.

A former megachurch pastor relays a story where he was invited to an event in the Holy Land with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. He was in the green room getting ready for this panel with these two spiritual giants, when suddenly they both entered the room from opposite sides. Bishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama are longtime friends so when they saw each other and walked toward one another, embraced

and then they started tickling each other in front of this pastor. The pastor said, "What could I do but whip out my phone to capture this image of these two deeply spiritual men tickling one another."<sup>1</sup>

Bishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama are two people who know better than most the reality of the human condition. They are two men who have seen the worst that humanity has to offer, violence, hatred, persecution, oppression, the darkest dark of night. And yet, here they are, having pushed through all of that, having incorporated all of this into their stories and the stories of those who they serve, and yet, like St. Paul they refuse to let death have the last word, they are still here, they are still proclaiming with their lives that love and laughter and life itself will always win.

Paul's writing in this letter to this marginal and persecuted group of Christians urges this call to lives of humble life-giving grace in the midst of all circumstances. He encourages the church of Philippi to be people of gentleness, kindness and prayer. He calls them to live reframing their lives on what is just, what is pure, what is pleasing and commendable.

This continues to be our call as Christians in our time and place, this radical call to live counter culturally, as agents of grace and kindness in a world that often doesn't value gentleness but values instead a win at all cost, take the bull by the horns approach to life.

I was on twitter a couple weeks ago when I ran across this meme of Mr. Rogers, who I just love right, like who doesn't love Mr. Rogers, it was a picture of Mr. Rogers and a quote from him which said: "there are three ways to ultimate success, the first way is to be kind, the second way is to be kind, the third way is to be kind."

This is the wisdom of this passage, that we must be kind and to let our gentleness be known to all. Even in the midst of difficult times, remain centered in kindness and compassion.

Don't allow your heart to be eaten up by the negative, by the hopelessness, by the anger and despair that exists in our world. Paul says be kind, be gentle, because kindness is the way to an abundant life, kindness breaks cycles of anger and bitterness, kindness relieves you of the burden of judgement and condemnation, kindness transforms our hearts and sets us free.

It's like when you're at work and you're feeling undervalued and underappreciated and you've had that really long day at the end of a terrible week, and you're wondering if it is really worth it, when all of the sudden someone says, "you know I've noticed you work really hard, thanks for all you do for this team." And just that kind word ignites your heart and it lifts your spirits and it reframes everything and suddenly you just start walking a little lighter.

Or maybe it's like when you run into that person in your life who just annoys you like no other, and you know that the minute they see you they are going to launch into all the things going wrong in their life and you just don't have time because you've got to get your coffee and get on with your day. They see you and immediately start in, sharing all the stuff they've got going on. As they're sharing your thinking to yourself, man they are really self-involved, when all of the sudden they say, "oh I wanted to ask about your how your mom is doing, I heard she's been in the hospital? I've been praying for her." In that moment you're totally surprised by grace; your stone-cold heart is melted.

This is what Paul is getting at. He's saying that kindness has the ability to transform your way of seeing the world and also transform the hearts of those around us. He's teaching us to reframe the narrative in our heads through the lens of love. See it seems like most of us have this narrative running in our head which tends to focus on all of the negatives about ourselves and those around us, it focuses on all the things that went wrong or could go wrong, all of the ways that we've been mistreated or harmed. We tend to hold onto these things inside our heads and our hearts and we make them into our story, no matter how small or insignificant they might be.

Paul implores us to reframe the narrative in our hearts, to acknowledge the pain or the struggle, but not to dwell on it, to focus instead on the good, the just, the commendable and the excellent. In doing so we transform the way that we see the world.

And the key in all of this is to stay rooted in love and hope and staying connected to God in prayer.

See prayer is about humbling ourselves and opening ourselves up enough to share with God all that we've got going on within our human heart. Prayer is about opening up our chest a little bit so that we can breathe. Prayer is about releasing the grip that we have on our life, this white-knuckle approach to living we sometimes have. Releasing enough to trust that there is in fact something else at work in this universe, an engine of forgiving love and unbounded joy that is at work undergirding all creation and our small, wondrous human life. A larger power which holds us in tender care, even when everything is falling apart. Prayer is recognizing that, even though we may not understand it, God is at work redeeming and remaking all things, picking up all the broken pieces so that not one thing is wasted.

In prayer we become aware of who we are and whose we are. We become aware that it is not up to us alone, because God truly is with us and that no matter where we've been, no matter how dark and winding the road has been, no matter how heavy the load or how scary the journey, we know that it will not define us because fear doesn't have the last word. In these moments of grace and revelation we find a peace, a peace that doesn't make sense if you're looking from the outside in, but we find peace, the peace that Jesus gives, that makes us whole and sets us free. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Notes:

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