

Last week Tandy kicked off our new five- week sermon series entitled, “Enemies of Gratitude”- those things that can keep us from being content and truly grateful. Last week was “nostalgia” and today we’ll look at “worry” as a potential enemy of gratitude in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Before we delve in, first a pastoral word. Yesterday was World Mental Health Day. Mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health. Mental health is just as important as physical health, as they are connected. Mental health is challenging enough and then to add months of social isolation, financial stress and fear of Covid on top of all that is happening around us, it is a lot. In today’s sermon we will be talking about worry. I want to reiterate that this is general worry not worry that comes with an anxiety disorder or other mental illness. If you are struggling with your mental health, please reach out to friends, family, Robin, Andrew, me, Tandy, or any of our staff or other professionals. Please know that you aren’t alone and that God loves you. **And now a little background in our scripture passage today. Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony. The Emperor at the time of Paul’s writing this letter was Caesar Augustus. Philippi, the site of an important military victory for Caesar Augustus, housed “monuments celebrating imperial power set amid shrines and temples dedicated to various deities, including the emperor himself. In a world where the emperor was proclaimed ‘savior,’ and offered ‘salvation’ in exchange for ‘faith,’ the Apostle Paul announces the ‘good news’ of the lordship not of Caesar but of the crucified Galilean, Jesus the Christ” (*The Discipleship Study Bible (TDSB)*, p.1998). Paul, Timothy, Silas and others had visited in Philippi some years before and helped to found the church there. The members of the Philippian church hold a special place in Paul’s heart, and he writes to and prays for them. I

n his correspondence, Paul lets them know that he is in prison, though he doesn't mention where. The church members write Paul and send him gifts to supply his needs while in prison. In this letter Paul reminds the Philippians that it is something different to be a disciple of Christ than to simply be a citizen of Rome. As followers of Christ they are called to live counter-culturally- living differently from what's expected. In today's passage, Paul is wrapping up his letter summing up the key themes of what he himself has taught and modeled to the congregation about how to live with faith in Jesus Christ. But before we read this morning's Scripture, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Read Philippians 4:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version). **READ.**

I've been going through some old boxes and came across a note my mom wrote me when I left home some years ago. It had three things listed.

- 1) You are never alone.
- 2) We will always love you.
- 3) Philippians 4:6-7.

My wise mom didn't write the words to the Scripture verses so that I would have to look it up or better yet commit these words to heart. I wonder if my mom thought I could use some practical advice for a life centered in Christ? "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be known to God" (Phil. 4:6-7). Do not worry about anything. How practical is that advice?! Easier said than done, right? As a matter of fact, this may be one of the hardest of all biblical instructions to keep. After all, we are human, and we worry. Upon reading these words today one may think that Paul obviously didn't live through the year 2020. Some of us worry about finding a place to live or a job or about getting or

unknowingly spreading the coronavirus or having a disease or a bad relationship or we worry about the addiction that eats at us or our loved ones or we worry about whether we can pay our bills, or that our children won't be safe or if we'll ever make a difference in the world. Some of us worry about what is happening in our country and the world...racial discrimination, global warming, growing gap in affordable housing, growing polarization, the upcoming election, you name it. Although Paul wasn't living in 2020, Paul was writing these words while he was in prison...on death row for preaching the gospel. One might imagine Paul had plenty to worry about. Paul isn't telling us to do things the Bobby McFerrin style- don't worry, be happy. No. He has seen up close the pain and darkness of this world. "More than likely, he is just as overwhelmed by the evil that grips God's creation; he just believes in another story" (*Lectionary Sermon Series, Vol. 1*, Brian Erikson). These aren't clichés or timeless platitudes that Paul is writing nor is he being a Pollyanna. These verses not only reveal something about God, but they also empower us in difficult times. Paul tells the Philippians and us that speaking with God, thanking God and letting our needs be known to Him, allows us to experience a peace that goes beyond our own understanding, outside of what we can even imagine. When we face hardship or feel overwhelmed by life, we're reminded here to authentically turn to God. I don't know about you but when I worry a lot, I tend to lose my focus on God and what God has done and what God can and continues to do.

Paul, as a follower of Christ, sees things in a different reality, in spite of his circumstances. He sees the reality of God's redemption in Jesus, already here and still drawing near. "Stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved," Paul writes (4:1). He begins by calling out two women who are in

a disagreement. We aren't told what that disagreement is but Paul uses the same language he used earlier in his letter to talk about unity- "be of the same mind in the Lord" (4:2). He goes on to identify these women as two of those who have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel. It's as if Paul knows that these two women, as well as everyone else in the community of faith, needed to be reminded that we all have unity in Jesus Christ. And then Paul tells them to Rejoice! – and then he repeats himself. "Again, I say rejoice" (v. 4). This was Paul's third time telling this community to rejoice (vv. 2:18, 3:1). So what is there to rejoice? A reminder is also needed that our joy is not grounded in the events of the day; our joy is grounded in Jesus Christ. One scholar put it this way: "Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances" (*FOW*, Nathan Eddy). "Paul doesn't say, 'Be joyful, because things are going well;' for Paul, nothing is going well. He doesn't say, rejoice in your family, or in your job, or in your well-being, or in the fact that you live free from all dangers. He says, 'Rejoice in the Lord'" (Erikson). Real and lasting joy comes from the confidence that, no matter what happens in our circumstances, we are inseparably connected to and redeemed by a loving God. In addition to rejoicing, Paul adds for them to let their gentleness be known and that the Lord is near. Through prayer- in both giving thanksgiving to God and in letting their requests be made known to Him, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (vv. 6-7). Paul is reminding his beloved Philippians that their concerns (as well as ours) are to be addressed not by worrying about them, but by developing habits or disciplines of prayer and rejoicing.

When we worry our focus can become too narrow, honed in on a particular issue or problem. We can often fail to see the bigger picture. Many of us wonder, “Can we do anything to worry less and be more at peace?” Here the Apostle Paul invites us to pray. “Like joy, prayer is not an escape but a practice regarding the same painful situation from another angle, one still open to multiple resolutions that God permits us to consider. Prayer here is relationship with God, not technique” (Eddy). Paul invites us to pray bringing everything, no matter how big or small to the God who loves us. Praying doesn’t need to be a grand gesture. It doesn’t need a script or the right words. Prayer is a conversation between you and God. No matter how hard we try, we cannot free ourselves from worry on our own. Yet Christ meets us in our worry, because Christ has descended to the depths of human despair. In Christ, God is with us and God’s peace guards our minds and hearts. **This is the source of our joy- nothing can steal that!**

These words of Scripture are not about less stress but about more trust. We become more free from worry when we learn to trust God more. Prayer lifts us above our narrow focus and helps to see more clearly. It also reminds us who and whose we are: children of God who are deeply loved. Some of you may have heard the phrase, “Let go and let God.” I confess that sometimes I really struggle with this concept- though in my heart I understand the message. However, I like to be in control, and letting go is not my forte. What about you? I saw a meme the other day with a picture of a beautiful tree that read, “The trees are about to show you just how beautiful letting go can be.” “Letting go of our worry is not a matter of ignoring what’s wrong; it’s a confidence in what is right. It’s dropping anchor in the good news of Jesus Christ rather than waiting for the news of

the world to calm us down” (Erickson). Letting go of the misnomer that you or anyone other than Christ is your Savior. Letting go involves a lot of trust as well as a new perspective. Trusting that God is in charge, not us.

Trusting that the Lord is near. Trusting that through prayer and giving thanks to God, the God of peace will give us peace. Therefore, maybe we can do this trusting thing in baby steps? Next time you find yourself worrying, what if you say something to yourself like, “I’m going to try and let go of my worries that may be dragging me down at this present moment. I place these concerns in God’s hands- at least for these few minutes of prayer.” And then try it again and again until it becomes a habit. The same with rejoicing. And if you don’t think you know how, look to your community of faith to walk with you in your faith journey. To close today, I’d like to offer a prayer written in 1953 entitled, “Our Little Lives” by Rev. Howard Thurman. I think you’ll agree that his prayer is as timely today as it was when he wrote it. Let us pray:

Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!

The quietness in Thy Temple of Silence again and again rebuffs us:

For some there is no discipline to hold them steady in the waiting

And the minds reject the noiseless invasion of Thy Spirit.

For some there is no will to offer what is central in the thoughts—

The confusion is so manifest, there is no starting place to take hold.

For some the evils of the world tear down all concentrations

And scatter the focus of the high resolves.

War and the threat of war has covered us with heavy shadows,

Making the days big with forebodings—the nights crowded with frenzied dreams and restless churnings.

We do not know how to do what we know to do.

We do not know how to be what we know to be.

Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar!

Brood over our spirits, Our Father, Blow upon whatever dream Thou hast for us that there may glow once again upon our hearths the light from Thy altar. Pour out upon us whatever our spirits need of shock, of lift, of release.

*That we may find strength for these days—Courage and hope for tomorrow.
In confidence we rest in Thy sustaining grace, which makes possible triumph
in defeat, gain in loss, and love in hate. We rejoice this day to say:
Our little lives, our big problems—these we place upon Thy altar
(*Meditations of the Heart*, pp. 83-84)! Thanks be to God. Amen.*