

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Jesus - All About Peace

(Philippians 4:1-9)

Study #8

Sermon series: It's All About Jesus

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Philippians)

Introduction: "peace" and PEACE...

Between the years 1947 and 1991, the Soviet Union and the United States never traded blows. You could say that there was *peace*.

Because of the presence of "mutually assured destruction" in the event of a nuclear war, both superpowers were unwilling to risk overt hostilities.

But, there was constant tension. Nuclear holocaust was always a threat. And there was fighting, too, that took place elsewhere, by proxies. (Korea; Vietnam; Cuba)

The Cold War didn't give the world a very peaceful peace.

Then, on either side of Jesus' life was the Pax Romana, a three hundred year span of no warfare created by the power of Rome's military might. Nobody dared stand against Rome.

But peace - as it is presented in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible - is much more than the absence of hot conflict.

Peace is a concept derived from the Hebrew "*shalom*" that means something like wholeness, tranquility, security and stability.

There's nothing satisfying about tense standoffs and cold staredowns. We want peace between parties based on mutual respect and love and justice.

And the thought of enjoying relationships in our homes, on our streets and inner cities, and between nations that are stable, tranquil, and loving makes our mouths water. We hunger for that kind of peace.

We could use a bit of that peace in a day like today in which there's so much un-peace. For the next few minutes, we're going to allow the Apostle Paul to take us on a journey to peace, in three of its most beautiful and powerful forms.

Before talking peace, though, let's review where we've been.

Review and Preview...

Paul just finished urging (3:20-21) that we who have been saved by God's amazing grace when we believed in Jesus are to "**press on**" by following wherever Jesus leads because - after all - we are citizens of heaven.

This is the letter's homestretch and Paul tells the Philippians *that* he loves them and *how much* he loves them. What we read here may be the most affectionate language in all of Paul's writings.¹

There are four "terms of endearment" in this one verse.

- He calls the Philippians his "**beloved brethren**."
- He says, not, "*Let's hope our paths cross...*" but "**I long to see you**."
- He is proud of them and calls them his "**joy and crown**"²
- And to wrap it all up, repeats, "**my beloved**."

¹Throughout this letter, Paul has called these Christians *saints* (1:1), *partakers of grace* (1:7), *brethren* (1:14), and *the true circumcision* (3:3). He chooses his titles carefully to fit the emotional context, another evidence that the Apostle Paul was a fiery apostle and a man skilled in literature.

² When he identifies the Philippians as his joy and crown, he refers to the victory wreaths that were given to the winners of races in the ancient Greek games. In some way, their standing firm in the Lord would be to his own advantage when he stood before the Lord.

Paul and the Philippians had a deep bond forged by a common faith and shared struggles. They were close, allies, teammates, partners.³

He urged these dear friends to **[4:1] stand firm in the Lord.**

If they are “**pressing on**” (3:12, 14) they are making progress in Jesus. If they are “**standing firm**” they are maintaining spiritual balance while their world was in crisis.

This past week, as Hurricane Laura passed through Louisiana, we saw people - mostly weather reporters - trying to stand firm in the winds of the storm. Sometimes they failed and lost their balance.

When the evacuees make their way back to Lake Charles, they’ll have a hard time standing firm if the first thing they see is a lost home.

Storms work against our ability to stand firm, and Paul didn’t write into a vacuum. Storms had hit his Christian friends in Philippi. Added on top of the normal storms of life - plagues, famines, war - the Christians there faced the storms of persecution.

Storms hit with regularity in our own day, too. 2020 has been one long storm and you may be struggling to stand firm, keep your equilibrium in Jesus, maintain spiritual balance.

Jesus offers you peace to gain stability in the storm. In what we’re about to see, Paul points the way to a peace so strong that you can stand firm no matter how hard the winds blow.

He starts by addressing a storm that can hit any church, including our own. So, we’re paying close attention.

Peace with Fellow Citizens of Heaven (vv. 2-3)

Two Good Women in the Church at Philippi

Their names

[2] I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. [3] Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Paul addresses this storm frontally and explicitly, naming two women in the church: Euodia and Syntyche.⁴

THAT he names them is significant. Most often, when Paul addresses “situations” in a church in one of his letters, he stays vague and general. Here he uses their names. We who read the letter two thousand years later know their names.

Their stories

Paul speaks highly of these two women. We can easily imagine them being heroes of the first century Christian movement.⁵

They may or may not have been among the first converts in Philippi (see Acts 16), but they at least had enough history with the church to “**have shared [in Paul’s] struggle in the cause of the gospel.**”

These women who would have shared their faith with friends and family, met needs in Jesus’ Name, supplied Paul and Silas with food while they were in jail, and endured persecution as they helped Paul.

⁴ The meaning of those names, according to most is interesting, perhaps significant. “Euodia” means “a prosperous journey”; “Syntyche” “a pleasant acquaintance.” Thomas Constable understand the meaning of the name Euodia to be “success” and the meaning of Syntyche, “lucky”.

⁵ Please notice the high regard Paul had for women and their importance in the Gospel ministry. Throughout his writings he makes reference to women fellow-servants, and women who worked alongside of him in furthering the Good News.

³The Greek word that means “I long to see you” (*επιποτηται*) - is found only here in the New Testament.

Given all of this, we're surprised to learn that these two good women weren't getting along.

Dis-Harmony

If it seems odd to you that Paul would have to address the problem of Christians not getting along, well, welcome to church.

Believers in Jesus - both men and women - do, from time to time, struggle to maintain harmonious relationships.

Paul has heard through the grapevine that, for some reason, Euodia and Syntyche had suffered a relational fracture.

Perhaps because of their prominence in the church - or maybe because he loved them! - Paul felt the need to call out the women who were at odds with each other. He called them out by name.

[2] I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

And remember that this was not a personal letter to Euodia and Syntyche. It was an apostolic letter sent to the whole church. It would have been read - out loud - when the church gathered for worship.

Can you imagine how Euodia and Syntyche would have felt as this part of the letter was read to the church? How would you feel if your name was read aloud to the congregation this morning, as needing to reconcile with someone here?

I'd look for a chair to hide under if, right now, someone came in with a letter from Paul or Peter or John and read out loud, "*I urge Dave and ??? to live in harmony in the Lord.*"

Talk about exposure!

Help Needed

Well, Paul doesn't tell us what was the problem or whose fault it was. And catch what else he doesn't say.

He doesn't say, "*Yep, it's a shame about Euodia and Syntyche, but let's press on, now, to more important matters.*" or "*Let one of them start attending Northwest Philippi Community Church and the other can continue on at First Church.*"

No!

He wants these two women to get along and he urges that others in the church help them find relational *peace*.

They are not to work around the problem or avoid each other. Using the people resources of the church, they are to reconcile.

He asks an unnamed (interesting that he or she is not named...) "***true comrade***" but evidently highly esteemed person in the church - to help these two women back to the path of love.

He calls on someone named Clement⁶ to help. He expects "***the rest of his fellow workers***" in the church at Philippi to help. This was a congregation-wide project.⁷

What does this churchwide effort at fence-mending tell us but that harmonious relationships between us in the church is REALLY important? It speaks volumes about how intent we should be to maintain unity with each other in the church.

We can't fulfill our purpose of turning the world's attention to the Lord if there is disharmony or cold politeness between us.

I believe that if Paul was with us this morning, speaking to those gathered and to those watching a live stream, he would ask, "*Ais there someone here at church - a fellow-citizen of heaven, by the way, someone with whom you will share eternity! - with whom you need to reconcile?*"

⁶ Clement was a common first name, and we don't know precisely who this Clement was.

⁷ I agree with Dr. Robert Lightner who thinks that the words "along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers" means that Paul was enlisting Clement and others to help "the true comrade" to unite the women.

Jesus said (John 17) that our love for each other impacts a watching world's perception about Christianity and about Jesus' life-changing power.

God wants you and that person to live in harmony in the Lord. And He wants you and me to take whatever action and initiative is necessary to restore the peace.

In recent years, the Elders here at Northwest have given special prayer emphasis to the themes of unity and love flowing between us.

We have prayed that the uses to which we put the LSP, our COVID-19 crisis response, and politics will not cause disharmony. And - praise God! - we have experienced His protection in this.

If there is someone with whom you need to make peace, I urge you to write their name down on paper or type it into your device to remind yourself to pursue a reconciling conversation this week.

If might require an apology on your part. It might require forgiveness on your part. But, as much as it depends on you, be at peace with your brothers and sisters in Jesus.⁸

The Lord also wants us each to experience His peace in our internal lives. Paul says that this is a peace we enter through the door of worship.

The Peace God Gives When We Worship (vv. 4-7)

Rejoice in the Lord, and Know Peace (vv. 4-5)

[4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. [5] Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

These words aren't directed to a couple of people. Paul writes this to the entire congregation.

Every Christian attending the church at Philippi is to ***“rejoice in the Lord.”***

Regardless of personal challenges, physical health, finances, marital status - rejoice in the Lord.

Paul isn't being Mr. Pollyanna, as in, *“Be happy. Everything will turn out all right. Just look for the silver lining in the storm clouds of life.”*

Paul knew better than most of us ever will that life can be unspeakably hard. But he insists that we rejoice ***“in the Lord.”***

And, then, as if he thinks we are hard of reading, he repeats himself - ***“again I say, rejoice.”***

I was wondering this past week why Paul would repeat himself, and it dawned on me that someone, hearing Paul urge that he ***“rejoice in the Lord”*** might be muttering, *“Paul's got to be kidding.”*

So, Paul repeated himself because he wanted the next thing that person heard was, ***“Again I say, rejoice.”***

Life was tough in Philippi. It was tough when Paul was there and it continued to be tough for the young Christians after he left.

Writing to people going through hard times, Paul had some credibility when he said, ***“Rejoice in the Lord!”*** because he and Silas had been heard singing hymns of praise to God (they rejoiced) while in the Philippian jail!

He would say to us who are living through upheaval on a society-wide level, who may also be going through personal disruption due to anything else, ***“Rejoice in the Lord!”***

Now, it may be that you're sitting where you are - at church or at home - listening to this and thinking, *“You expect me to rejoice about xxxx? No way.”*

Here's what I think the Apostle Paul would say to you.

⁸ See Jesus on this same theme, Matthew 5:23-24.

“I’m not urging you to rejoice ABOUT your tragedies. I didn’t rejoice THAT I was stoned nearly to death or THAT I was beaten with rods. Silas and I weren’t rejoicing THAT we had been thrown in jail in Philippi. We were rejoicing IN THE LORD while we were in jail.”

So, yes, rejoice. In the middle of whatever, rejoice because God is who He is.

Rejoice because of the way He loves you. Rejoice because He showers His grace on you in the storm. Rejoice that you are God’s child.

Take a posture of worship, delight in God, rejoice in the Lord.⁹

Peace follows as we praise and worship God. And peace follows as we pray.

Pray, and Know Peace (vv. 6-7)

[6] Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard¹⁰ your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Don’t be anxious about anything (v. 6a)

I think that Paul hit the nail on the head with these words, because anxiety may well be the emotion of 2020.

Life can be stressful at most any time. Today? Just about anywhere you look you can find things to worry about.

⁹ Then, there is this story, told by Richard Wurmbrand (founder of The Voice of the Martyrs) in his book, Tortured for Christ, “It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their [the communists’] terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy.”

¹⁰“Guard” is a military term meaning, “to protect or garrison by guarding.”

- How will this school thing work itself out this year?
- How will my job thing work out?
- Will I get the virus? Will my loved ones?
- Will the virus ever go away?
- Will the shutdowns ease?
- And on and on and on we could go.

People in Louisiana and in California worry that their homes won’t be there when they return from firestorms and hurricanes.

Global tensions, the broader economy, and politics are fertile grounds for worrying. We worry about untended friendships and unseen extended family.

I read this week that Census Bureau data taken back in May found that a third of Americans are showing signs of clinical anxiety or depression. That’s about double the rate prior to the pandemic.¹¹ (That was in May. I wonder what it is now?)

Worry can be debilitating. Anxiety robs us of sleep at night and productivity during the day.

So, what do we do when life’s challenges prompt anxious thoughts and hearts? The antidote to anxiety is faith. And among the best means of expressing faith in God and growing faith is prayer.

Pray about everything (v. 6b)

Of course, faithful living is great, and Paul never urges that we be passive when confronting tough times. In fact, he tells us that we should act responsibly, live boldly, use wisdom.

But along with actively doing everything we can do, there is always one more thing that can be done about everything that comes our way. We can PRAY.

¹¹ From an article in the Washington Post, “Americans with Depression and Anxiety”

Prayer is the ultimate exercise of our faith muscle. In prayer, we speak to a God we can't see. Praying is, by definition saying, "I can't." Prayer is trusting Him to do what only He can do.

This was Jesus' thought when He gave the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-33) and reminds us that the lilies of the field don't work, yet are cared for by God.

He goes on to say that there is, therefore, no reason to worry, because our heavenly Father knows that we need food, clothing, and shelter, too. If He takes care of flowers, He'll take care of you.

Faith-full prayer is the soul taking rest in the care of God. And in our trusting prayers, we are to speak to God gratefully.

Give thanks IN everything (v. 6b)

Just like we saw a couple of minutes ago, Paul does not say, "Give thanks FOR everything."

No. In whatever circumstance we find ourselves, we are to give thanks to God. No matter what is going on around us, express gratitude to God.

Remember that you are always welcomed into God's presence. He is always listening as you pray to Him. He is right there with you in the valley. Always maintain the posture of thanksgiving.

And what is the result of this kind of praying?

God's peace is yours (v. 7)

This kind of gratitude-to-God-centered prayer dissolves anxiety.¹² So, how does grateful prayer dissolve anxiety?

Easy. Here's how it works. Let me explain...

Well, actually, it's not so easy to explain. At least, that's what Paul says. This peace we receive when we gratefully pray "**surpasses all comprehension.**"

Peace reigning in the heart of a person in the midst of tragedy, or after a catastrophe, or while spiraling downhill financially, or in the immediate aftermath of a personal loss doesn't make sense.

That person should be coming apart at the seams.

If they are not falling apart, something incomprehensible and inexplicable is happening. God must be at work. God does His work of gracing us with His peace when we pour out our hearts to Him in worship, pray with gratitude, and rejoice in Him.

And, since we're on the subject of prayer, let me just say a word about prayer, generally. I believe in the power and in the importance of prayer. But I am tempted to resist it and to not pray.

This - prayerlessness - is one of several evidences of my "bent" toward an ugly independence from God.

So, to combat my tendency to prayerlessness, I have put in place certain disciplines (habits, practices) in my life.

- Except when I forget, I send out a list of prayer requests to anyone who says they want to receive them on Tuesday mornings. This is a great help to me to keep a prayerful focus.
- I have a prayer partner with whom I pray once a week, for an hour. That partnership is huge in helping me learn to pray.
- I take prayer walks through my neighborhood - usually early in the morning - on several days during the week.
- I am learning to pray about requests that I become aware of, and to pray with people when I am with them "in the moment."

More and more, I want to enter the peace here and now that is the permanent *status quo* in Heaven. I seek that peace through prayer.

I want you to know that inner peace of God, too.

¹²You will note that Paul uses four key words to describe communion with God: prayer; petition; thanksgiving; requests.

So, look for something to put in place in your life that will help you learn to pray.

- Five minutes in the middle of the day carved out for you and Jesus.
- Place a new note each week on the refrigerator with a prayer verse.
- Join the church's email Prayer Chain or sign up to get my Tuesday prayer list.

Put in place something helpful that will foster prayer.

We are to pursue peace with each other, keep short accounts, quickly forgive and apologize, seek reconciliation. And, we are to pursue the incomprehensible peace of God by rejoicing in the Lord and gratefully praying about whatever we are facing.

Paul's final thought about peace is that a life marked by "*trust and obey*" brings us a greater sense of the presence of the God who grants peace.

Accessing the God of Peace as We Trust and Obey (vv. 8-9)

A Command to Obey (vv. 8-9a)

[8] Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.¹³

I'm not going to spend time giving a detailed definition of each of these terms because I really don't think it's necessary.

What Paul gives us here is a list of universally admired moral virtues. It's not an exhaustive list. It's more of a "for instance" list.

¹³ "True" (*alethe*) means valid, honest, and reliable (cf. Rom. 3:4). "Honorable" (*semna*) means worthy of respect (cf. Prov. 8:6; 1 Tim. 3:8, 11; Titus 2:2). "Right" (*dikaia*) refers to what is just and upright. "Pure" (*hagna*) denotes cleanness, moral purity. "Lovely" (*prosphele*) means what is agreeable, pleasing. "Of good repute" (*euphema*) refers to what is praiseworthy because it measures up to the highest standards.

He could have probably added other virtues. The thing is that when we see any of the character traits listed here on display in someone's life, we are inspired.

By urging us to "***dwell on these things***," he's borrowing directly from Jesus, who repeatedly told His disciples to be careful about what they thought about, because the thought precedes the deed.¹⁴

If we take in through the eyes or ears stuff that's ugly - porn, violence, aggressive belligerence - ugly will come out.

When we spend time with people of character, Scripture, and nature's wonder - beauty follows.

Expose yourself to the kinds of things Paul lists (v. 8) and you'll think about them.

And we want to think about them because the things we think about become the things we do. The things we "***dwell on***" create the kinds of people we become.

Hence, the command.

[9a] The things you have learned and received and heard and see in me, practice these things...

A good, old song tells us to "trust and obey". Well, Paul reverses the order in these last verses, but says the same thing. We are to obey - "***practice these things***" - and trust one beautiful promise.

A Promise to Embrace (v. 9b)

[9b]...and the God of peace will be with you.

Don't miss the enormity of this.

¹⁴ See Matthew 5:27-30; Matthew 15:15-20.

God is always with us who have believed in Jesus. That promise is given repeatedly in the New Testament (Check out Matthew 28:20 and Hebrews 13:5, among others.)

Paul's words here remind us of that. But his words do something else. He whets our appetites with a tantalizing hope.

We've already processed that "***the peace of God***" will guard our hearts and our minds when we rejoice and gratefully pray. (4:7)

Now he speaks of "***the God of peace.***"

When we dwell on the things that the Spirit uses to transform us into people of character, we experience a deeper walk with, a greater sensitivity to, a heightened awareness of "***the God of peace.***"

He is with you when you're on Zoom and when you put on your mask.
He is with you as you fall asleep and when you wake up.
He is with you on the mountaintops of joy and when you pass through deep valleys of sadness.
He is with you when you lose your job or your health.

What greater privilege could any of us ever hope for than to know at ever-deepening levels that God is with us?

So...trust and obey.