

A Worry-Free life; How to Hold on to Peace. Philippians 4:4-9  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
Pastor Joseph Bagdanov; Sept 17, 2023

Friends of Christ, we find ourselves in week three of our September series on “A Worry-Free Life”. In our first week Pastor Jamie asked the question, “what if Jesus was actually telling the truth when he says that we shouldn’t worry about tomorrow, but we should seek first the kingdom of God and all those other things will be added. What if the secret to a worry-free life is to step off the wheel and exit the rat race? We continued in week 2 where Pastor Jamie pointed us to the truth that as much as we seek peace elsewhere, God is the only true peace. The Scriptural formula for peace is to tie ourselves to Jesus’ cart. To rely on him, to trust him, to learn how to do life from Jesus.

This third Sunday we are going to talk about ways to strengthen and to hold on to that peace. Real peace is only acquired through seeking first the kingdom of God and by yoking ourselves to Jesus. But how do we put that into practice? How do we seek the kingdom, what are we learning from Christ. Using an analogy of a campfire: if Jesus starts the fire for us, how do we keep the fire going? What are the spiritual equivalents to twigs and logs and little pieces of newspaper that we can throw into the fire to keep it well tended? Because, while peace is first a gift from God, it still takes tending. Peace, like a campfire must be maintained. So today, we are going to talk about spiritual kindling, taken from the Bible and tested in contemporary science.

This morning we begin with Paul’s letter to the Philippians, hear now these words from the book that we love, **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 gratitude 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, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”**

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I don't know about you, but when I first come across a phrase like "do not worry about anything" I'm annoyed. Are you annoyed? It's like when an argument has gotten heated and someone says, "calm down." These phrases feel trite, and it seems like whoever you are talking to is writing off the thing you are worried or upset about. As if it were that easy, like we could simply stop worrying at will.

At first, even preparing for this sermon, I was a little disappointed with Paul's answer to this question: How do we hold on to peace? Paul says, "just stop worrying about it."

But then, after sitting with the text for a little longer, I was a bit humbled. Because I remembered that Paul was writing this letter from prison. He probably wrote somewhere between A.D 61-63, and was quite literally, in chains. Paul has all kinds of reasons to be worried, to be fretting anxiously. he is awaiting trial. a trial that would eventually sentence him to death. And this is the advice that he gives. So I reconsidered and thought, we should probably listen, because this is someone who has peace even amidst great turmoil.

I was struck by Jamie's insight that God's peace is not determinate on circumstance. If the only way that I can experience peace is by having a perfectly clean, serenely silent, environment with all of the perfect little elements, then my pursuit of peace will not be a lick useful when things actually fall apart. Which is why Jamie spoke about the definition of Shalom, it is not an absence of conflict, but a presence of wholeness, an integrity. This wholeness is what then means you can have peace even when your situation is far from peaceful. The peace that God promises is not merely an external state of affairs but an internal strength to weather trials.

If Paul could only experience peace when laid out on the beaches of Santorini with an apperol spritz, we may want to join him on the beach, but we wouldn't think he was a good teacher of peacefulness. But, because Paul, once a blood thirsty zealot turned into someone who could rejoice in all things, even when persecuted, we have someone who can teach us something.

Many years ago I attended a talk led by a Lebanese Christian who works with Christians across the Arab world. In the session he was asked how American Christians could pray for the Church in places where it can be quite difficult to be a Christian. He replied that when you speak to persecuted Christians and ask them how you can pray for them, they usually ask for strength and perseverance, rather than for their situation to be changed.

This is not to say that we don't pray for situations to be changed and that we don't work towards justice and peace for others, and yes sometimes that is political work. The point is that the spiritual maturity that I think we are all looking for, is the strength to be able to have peace no matter our situation.

So with all that said, I want to propose two quick insights about maintaining peace from Paul's brief treatment here in Philippians: Telling ourselves the right kinds of stories and practicing prayer.

Now, when I first wrote this sermon I had four strategies from Philippians, but this sermon got too long. So if you are interested in hearing about how having good models of faith and practicing gratitude can help maintain peace, that will be in the print version of the sermon. But we are going to focus on the first two strategies for maintaining peace this morning.

## First Strategy: Models of Faith

So let's start with having solid models of faith. Paul says, **"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you"** Here Paul is speaking about himself and you will notice that this sermon is taking Paul as a model of faith, but I also want to encourage you to broaden your horizons. The Christian faith has existed for 2,000 years, which means there are remarkable people to take inspiration from throughout that history. Heck, there are remarkable people within this congregation to learn from and model your faith on.

I think this is one of those things that Catholics do really well. Catholics have books and books and books about the lives of saints. Catholics sometimes take on saints that they read about and try and emulate. Sometimes a catholic will dedicate a season of their life to taking on a saint that they resonate with and then seeing how they dealt with particular problems, life circumstances, faith crises.

You might be thinking: I could see how this is good advice but how specifically would this help me maintain peace? First, I think it gives us perspective. Seeing someone living through a catastrophic period of history or particularly tumultuous personal struggles helps us properly assess things that happen around us. Second, it gives us a model of positive faith. It shows us how a real-life person—someone we can relate with—actually handled the chaos. It gives us a road map to follow.

Scientific studies have been conducted in Children showing the positive effects of reading biographies. The children showed increases in self-esteem, empathy, and problem solving. I think all of these could help strengthen us to put aside worry and approach life with more peace.

So perhaps this could be the year that you take on a patron saint of sorts. A biography on Bonhoeffer, Barbara Brown Taylor's *Leaving Church*, Augustine's confessions, or the little way of St. Therese. Choose someone you are drawn to, and in the words of Paul, **Whatever you have learned or received or heard from [them], or seen in [them]—put it into practice.**

## Second Strategy: Telling a Better Story

The first strategy for holding on to peace that we are going to consider this morning is Paul's suggestion that we tell ourselves a better story. Paul says, **whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,**

**whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.**

I want to take this in two directions. The first is telling the right story, theologically. And the second is telling ourselves a better story day to day.

Humans are shaped by story. We are a species that is absolutely formed by our narratives. This is a central insight of the work of someone like Brene Brown, who distinguishes between stories of shame vs. stories of guilt. This is a twist in how we tell the story of our lives. Brene says that we live a shame story when we say that we are horrible, worthless, bad people. When we do something wrong or someone tells us that we did something wrong, shame is when we attribute that to our core identity. Brene contrasts this with guilt, which is the recognition that I did something bad and I need to rectify that. Shame paralyzes us whereas guilt moves us to action. Now, this insight would be enough to take to the bank this morning, but I actually only tell it to illustrate how powerful stories are.

So when Paul says that we should think about things that excellent and praiseworthy and noble etc. He is pointing us towards the things that our soul is dwelling on. When it comes to how we think about God it makes a great deal of difference which story we are telling. I think sometimes when we talk about “true theology” or that our theology is crucially important that can come across as stodgy or strident or controlling, like thought-policing. Right? The problem is that our theology reflects how we see the world, it reflects what we think is the core of reality. How the universe works. And so if you think that we are simply sinners in the hands of an angry God your existential anxiety is going to be through the roof.

I love this quote from Martin Luther King Jr, I have modified some of the language simply because how we talk about mental health in 2023 is different than the 60's, but I have not changed the meaning,

**“Chronic anxiety and phobias that are expressed in clinical anxiety may be treated by psychiatry; but things like shame and chronic worrying and the fear**

**of death, nonbeing, and nothingness, that are expressed in existential anxiety, may be cured only by a positive faith. A positive faith does not offer illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come, and assures us that the universe is trustworthy and that God is concerned."**

Here is another person telling us that a worry-free life is not a life free of things to worry about, but is the result of an inner equilibrium needed to face the things we are worried about. MLK says that this inner equilibrium is given by a positive faith, one based on our stories of the universe being trustworthy and God being a good God who is genuinely concerned for us.

When you truly shift your theology from one of shame and fear and begin to see yourself as a child of God, a God that is trustworthy and cares about you, then we can actually experience what Augustine talks about when he says that "our hearts are restless until they rest in God" but our theology of God needs to be set straight if we are going to experience that rest. We need to tell ourselves the Gospel, which happens to be good, and true, and beautiful.

Telling ourselves a better story, theologically, can begin to rewrite how we conceive of our core identity and the world around us. And this is no small beans when it comes to our peace. But I also want to consider the more mundane stories we tell ourselves. This won't necessarily be theological advice, but just pastoral and personal advice for your edification. We tell ourselves stories all day. Small stories. Seemingly insignificant stories. But they can douse the campfire we are attempting to tend. The peace that we are hoping to maintain.

When someone cuts you off while driving. You can write your own story. That person is such a jerk. Look, they have a California license plate. They are probably a miserable person who doesn't consider others and hates all that is good in this world. We all know we tell stories like this and we all know that I toned down the type of stories we tell because I am in a pulpit and not a car. \

Now, this story could be true. But, it also could be totally false. They could be rushing their child to the emergency room they could be having the hardest day of their life. They could have just been distracted.

This can sound a little cliché right. And it could smack of self-deception. After all, you are just a realist right? Don't give me this toxic positivity, pastor. But the research is clear, this type of negative story telling is harming you much more than it is helping you. Giving people the benefit of the doubt, assuming good intentions, and interpreting events as unfortunate rather than a malicious plot against you is perhaps some of the most practical steps you can take towards worrying less and experiencing more peace.

### Third Strategy: Gratitude

The third strategy Paul gives us is gratitude! First he says, **Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice.** And then when describing prayer and supplication he says this should be done in gratitude. So the gratitude is wrapped up in other things. However, for our purposes we are going to separate it out as a distinct practice.

I am sure that gratitude is not something that surprises you here. People talk about gratitude journals as a grounding practice, one that inspires contentment with what we have, thanksgiving for our gifts. And I am sure that you have heard about people talk about scarcity and abundance. When we believe that all resources are scarce, our time, money, love, attention, that all these things are scarce. We clamp down, we become fearful, we produce worry on top of worry.

Now, this is not to say that money is not important, that actually being scarce on these things isn't stressful in their own right. Again, remember Jamie's first sermon about Jesus saying "don't worry about tomorrow" and she distinguished between obsessive worrying and right and responsible concern. Distinguishing between the two is crucial, and I think that gratitude can be one way that we can build our muscles to distinguish between the two.

So how do we practice gratitude? One of the most common suggestions is to keep a gratitude journal. Which I think is a great idea. But, certain studies have begun assessing whether this is as helpful as once thought. The problem with a journal is that we can treat it like a quick task, like three things I am grateful for, my house, my family, good coffee this morning. Done. And then we move on with our busy days. This is at best a tiny band-aid on a wound that needs stitches.

Scientific studies have begun studying instead, sessions of visualizing gratitude. This, I think, is merely saying that we need to try and recreate genuine moments of feeling grateful. So we can take a moment in our lives in which we were overwhelmed with gratitude and we can reflect on that memory. Try to recreate it in your mind. The trick to a gratitude practice is recreating the feeling, not merely churning out items on a list. Once you have practiced visualizing gratitude, try and apply that same level of reflection and attention to your list. You can still use the journal method, but it needs to be something you are genuinely dwelling on in your soul.

Another important element to reaping the benefits of gratitude is by receiving it! Being a person that receives gratitude, which means being kind and serving others, also has massive benefits on our mental health and feelings of internal peace. You have probably experienced this as you have gotten older, that it is far more satisfying to give a good gift and receive gratitude than it is to receive a good gift and express gratitude. Both are important and we should cultivate a balance of giving and receiving gratitude.

### Fourth Strategy: Prayer

The second strategy that we are going to consider from Paul is prayer. The apostle says, **Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with gratitude 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**

I think for many of us, when we are in the middle of being worried, we do not want to pray. In fact, it is probably the last thing we want to do. It is not unlike when we



you are feeling indignant about something, it feels cathartic to be angry, we want to lash out because there is a type of satisfaction in it. Similarly, when we are worrying, we want to dig into that worry. Stopping and praying feels like the furthest thing from our mind. In fact, the concept of being at peace when we are worried about something feels like a betrayal of our concerns. Like we have become aloof to the realities of our days.

I would commend trying to pray in the moment you are feeling most stressed, it will help. However, for right now, I want to focus instead on what a consistent practice of prayer will do for those same worries.

I want to start with the science here, because sitting in Church you have probably been encouraged to pray countless times and for multiple theological reasons, all of which are probably pretty valid. But, I want to encourage you that prayer has a physical effect on the person praying. This effect is long lasting and has a direct influence on how we handle feelings of anxiety and panic.

To this end I want to read you a quote from a secular scientist at the University of Wisconsin. Before I read this quotation, I want to show you a picture because the good doctor used a word that I didn't know, and I had to look it up. If you all knew what a culvert was before this, do me a favor and pretend you didn't. But here is a culvert,



it is one of those pipes that allows water to run under a road. If this didn't exist, the water would pool and at times flood the road above. So with that image, let's read the quote.

**Mindfulness [practices such as prayer and meditation] send thoughts through a new culvert: you still think about all you have to do, but when the sense of being overwhelmed kicks in, you regard that thought with dispassion. You think, well of course the sense of being overwhelmed is starting to course through my brain, but you step back from it and let go, realizing that allowing it to hijack your brain will not help. [mindful practice] retains these habits of mind by**

**tapping into the plasticity of the brain's connections, creating new ones, strengthening old ones, and weakening others."**

Now, at the end there when he uses the word "plasticity" he is referring to the fact that our brains are changeable. Not just in the sense that you can change your mind about a topic. But that the actual physical structure of your brain can be changed. It is plastic. It is not stone. And practices like prayer, even short amounts of prayer on a regular basis, can physically change the structure of your brain for the better. Prayer doesn't just help you in the moments you are praying, it will have long term benefits on your mental health. It will make you a more peaceful person.

Because, as he says here, prayer has created a new culvert in your brain. A new channel for panicky thoughts to run through so they don't flood your brain and overwhelm you. Prayer is a primary tool for the Christian. It can both be used as an in the moment stop-gap between you and overwhelm and also as a long-term practice that strengthens your ability to handle the chaos of life. If Prayer is something you feel unfamiliar with, I would encourage you to reach out to me or to Jamie. We can both point you in the right direction. Because, there are a variety of ways to pray, so if the strategy you have been using hasn't been helping you then there are a multitude of other alternative practices of prayer that you can incorporate into your spiritual lives. But the real trick is getting alone, getting silent, and putting yourself before the presence of God. You don't have to say much, but get contemplative and breathe.

So friends, hear this good news this morning. Christ, the prince of peace is inviting you to a worry-free life. Jesus is inviting you to take on his yoke which is easy, and it brings real and sustainable peace. The Christian tradition has so many spiritual tools for experiencing that peace and maintaining that peace. We have explored just a few this morning. But I hope that this has given you a taste, that God has not left us out on our own. God has gifted us with practices and patterns of life which strengthen us, so that we can be people of peace even amidst the storms.

Let's pray.

