

Sermon 11/24

Wednesday night, as part of our discussion series, we talked about Bible verses that are special to us, and for many people (myself included) the verses we just read from Philippians 4 are words that are quite special. They speak so powerfully of joy and thankfulness in the midst of strife, of God's peace which works in our hearts regardless of our outward circumstances, of the nearness of God whenever we call out to him. These words have inspired many, but they are also words that have probably rung hollow for many as well. We might think how can I be thankful in this circumstance that I'm going through right now, we might think these words sound nice but don't match up with reality, they would sound nice on a greeting card but...As the great 16th century reformer John Calvin put it, these verses can be challenging because "nothing is more foreign to the human mind, than in the depth of despair to exercise, nevertheless, a feeling of hope, in the depth of poverty to see *opulence*, and in the depth of weakness to keep from giving way, and, in fine, to promise ourselves that nothing will be wanting to us when we are left destitute of all things; and all this in the grace of God alone, which is not itself known otherwise than through the word, and the inward earnest of the Spirit."

And I'm somewhat of a pessimist myself (a life of being a Buffalo Bills fan will do that to you), so I might be inclined to agree that these words don't match up with reality. However, I wouldn't actually say that, because I've seen the reality of these words in my ministry. I know them to be true because of the people I have met in whom a

spirit of thankfulness and godly peace dwells even in the midst of great adversity. And I could talk about many people today in this regard, but I particularly want to mention two people who were members of my former church in Illinois who stood out to me in this regard. They were both the kind of people that leave you feeling that if you could clone them we wouldn't have so many problems in this world. The one was named Beulah the other Cathy. Both were devoted member of the church, and both battled cancer for years before finally going into hospice care.

I still remember being in the hospital room with Cathy when she told me that she was going to stop treatment and enter hospice. I was the one who was crying, and she was the one cheering me up! Probably not my finest moment of ministry, but I still remember the peace, calm and courage that she exuded facing death head on.

And then there was Beulah. Even before she stopped treatment, she was (physically speaking) very weak, yet she would come to both Sunday school and church almost every week pushing her walker. And she was always so thankful! She was thankful to be in church, and thankful for the people who helped her. When she entered hospice care she stopped coming to church (but only for a while). In fact, the doctors had only given her a few weeks to live, but she continued to exceed that expectation. One time when I came to visit her, she talked about wanting to come to church again soon. I kind of humored her but didn't think it would ever happen. Then there she was that next Sunday, and the Sunday after that. I couldn't believe it! And she was so thankful to be there, thankful for all of her

blessings, and she'd always say that she knew there were a lot of other people out there a lot worse off than she was. She eventually passed away (almost a year after she was only supposed to have weeks to live) as did Cathy. However, I am so thankful for what I learned from the two of them about having a spirit of thanksgiving and peace from God in the midst of trials. Those are the kinds of things they don't teach you in seminary, and I am so thankful to have had such good and faithful witnesses act as my teachers after seminary.

And likewise, the church in Philippi was blessed to have Paul as their teacher. For Paul, as he indicates in this letter, taught them by his words and his example. He wrote those beautiful words about peace and thankfulness even during difficult times in chapter 4 of the letter, but the beginning portion of the letter (which Pete read for us) shows that Paul himself was living out the words that he wrote. The section that Pete read for us begins with a thanksgiving section that is part of almost all of Paul's letters, but Philippians contains the biggest thanksgiving section of any of his letters. This seems a little odd as you read on in this letter and find out that Paul is writing it from prison. So what does Paul have to be thankful for in prison?

Well, he was thankful that the Philippian church continued to pray for him and support him. He was thankful that others, seeing that his own faith did not waver in prison, were also boldly preaching the Gospel. He was thankful even for those preachers who disagreed with him and were gloating over him being in prison while they were not, because at least they were preaching

Christ. He was thankful that he had a chance to witness to the guards who changed every four hours. And he was thankful that no matter what happened to him the Lord was near, right by his side, to guard his heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps the Philippians were not too surprised by how Paul acted. For after all, when he had previously been imprisoned in their own city, he responded by singing hymns to God and converting the jailer! However, it still must have been inspiring for the Philippians to see the spirit of thankfulness and peace which pervaded Paul during this latest imprisonment, just like seeing the thankfulness and peace that Beulah and Cathy exuded is still a source of inspiration for me. Conversely, if Paul had panicked, despaired and renounced his faith, imagine how discouraging that would have been for the church in Philippi and the other churches he had founded. But of course Paul did not flounder in his faith, and this provided great hope and encouragement for the Philippians, who were themselves beset by persecution for their faith.

And Paul was able to persevere in that attitude of thankfulness and peace because, as he wrote to the Philippians, he knew the Lord was near. This expression harkens back to the Book of Psalms where God being near is an expression used to communicate his attentiveness when we pray and his presence with us (especially in times of trouble). Paul's knowledge that the Lord is near is the key to Paul's spirit of thankfulness and peace in the midst of adversity. His knowledge that no matter what happens he belongs to God, that no matter what happens God is there to give him strength and

courage, and that no matter what happens God is there to hear him whenever he prays, that is the key.

Indeed, prayer is foundational to Paul's spirit of thankfulness and peace. Paul presents prayer as the antidote to worry and anxiety, both for himself and the Philippians. Which is why he says: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Note he does not simply say, "pray without ceasing," but to do so "with thanksgiving." In other words, Paul is saying that our requests to God should always first be grounded in our thanks to God for the blessings that God has already given us (chief among them his presence which always goes with us and before us). More than that, we should be thankful to God whenever we pray because prayer is the place where we can transfer our burdens to him, instead of giving ourselves the self-inflicted pain that comes when we hang on to our own burdens with anxiety. We should be thankful when we pray because prayer is the place where we exchange our burdens for the inner peace of knowing that our hearts, our minds, our very lives are kept and guarded by God. We should be thankful when we pray because (as John Calvin put it) we are not made of iron. Rather we are susceptible to temptation, frustration and discouragement, yet when we pray and give over all that we are to God we find him a sure and certain refuge from all that may befall us.

So, let us work with God to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving and peace within us. Let us indeed come to God with a thankful heart. Let us remember and be thankful for all the blessings that God has given us,

especially those people near and dear to us. Just as Paul was thankful for the Philippian church, which was dear to him as he held them in his heart. And above all, let us be thankful for God who is always near to us. And let us remember that a spirit of thankfulness and peace, rooted in the peace of God who is always near to us, can be a source of joy and strength for us, just as it was for Paul, Beulah and Cathy. More than that, as we see in the examples of Paul, Cathy and Beulah, such a spirit of peace and thanksgiving rooted in the God of peace can be a powerful inspiration to others as well. So, let us remember to (through God's grace) cultivate a spirit of peace and thanksgiving within us as we turn to the God of peace who is ever near to us, as we turn to him with thanksgiving, in a word of prayer. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all of your blessings, including the fact that you are always near to us when we pray. We thank you that you are there to bear our burdens with us and to grant us a spirit of peace and thanksgiving to counteract our anxiety and fear. We pray Lord that you would help us to have such a spirit of peace and thanksgiving even in times of trial, that we would know that we ourselves are guarded by you and that others might in turn be inspired by the spirit of thankfulness and peace which you have caused to grow within us. And we pray for all this in the name of him for whom we are ever grateful, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.