

“Practice What You Preach” based on Philippians 4:1-9 and Psalm 23

Delivered by Rev. Carol Ann Hoard on Sunday, Oct. 15, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Miranda was really on me this week about giving her a sermon title. I had been reading the scripture over and over again, and finally when I got to the part where it says, “As for all these things you have learned, received, heard and noticed in me, do them.” I was reminded of something my Momma always said, “Practice what we preach.” I thought: That’s going to be the title of the sermon, but this may not seem to you like it fits, “Practice what you preach,” but imagine this is the way we live and what is it that we preach on any given day?

Paul’s letter to church of Philippi is a sermon for us to start practicing what we preach. Paul grew to love and care for them and saw their faith in Christ as very important. It’s the content of the whole letter of Philippians that Paul’s life had been transformed in Christ. He was modeling living like Christ, who humbled himself, literally emptied himself for the sake of God’s love. Paul was practicing what he preached.

He longed to visit his family and friends again, but he couldn’t, so he writes letters. This particular letter is one of his nicer letters. It is an encouragement to the people of Philippi - to stand firm in the Lord.

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” We see it on signs, wall plaques, bookmarks. This is the same thing we see Paul saying throughout Philippians. Well, on another week Paul’s command to rejoice might seem easier to swallow but when there is so much pain, so much turmoil, so much hurt, so much grief in the world today, joy can be far from our hearts. And yet it says rejoice always and not just when the time is right. And life gives you reasons to rejoice but not all the time. There are some times you may not feel like rejoicing.

I know today is Mabel’s birthday, and it’s not pick on Mabel day, but I’m going to share a story that she shared with us at our Longest Night service. Some people call it a Blue Christmas service. On that night in Ellis Hall, we gave a time to share if anyone wanted to tell about their grief, the loved ones lost, and what they missed.

Mabel got up and told us about how Morris her husband had died, and she decided she was not going to do Christmas. Then she asked herself, “Why am I doing this? This is crazy.” Then she said, “I;m going to have a party.” She got her invitations ready and passed them out to her Sunday School class, to her friends and neighbors, and to people she didn’t even know. All of those people were welcomed into her home.

Paul is lessening the link between rejoicing and circumstances. Mabel knew her circumstance of that first Christmas without Morris was going to be rough. But she still found a way to rejoice. But Before Paul makes this statement of rejoicing, let’s look at what has been happening in Philippi. In an unusual move, he singles out two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Two women, apostles, and co-workers for the Gospel, I plea with you both to agree in the Lord.

It makes me curious what their disagreement was about that it would reach Paul in prison. We don’t and can’t know the root of the conflict – I even asked Drew, “Is there anything specific in the Greek that might give us something they were arguing about? Was it the color of carpet in the sanctuary or if the kitchen was ever going to be remodeled, or can we re-do the courtyard, or if one

of the women thought her opinion was being disregarded. Or maybe they disagreed about who could come to worship. Maybe they disagreed about who could lead communion.

We see in the example of these two women that living in church can be hard. But we do know this – these women suffered with Paul for Christ's sake. Both women were commended even in their division to have the same mind in the Lord. This was not that one would have to agree with the other, but that they would both have the same mind of the Lord.

In the midst of disagreement, where does your mind go? Mine goes to prove I'm right. If I'm disagreeing with someone, I'm going to want to do my darndest to prove I'm right. They had disagreements over something, but they also had something even bigger that they can agree upon. Paul calls them to think the same way in the Lord. Not only that, but he goes on and asks his coworker in the church to possibly help restore their relationship with each other and the community that has been broken.

There are all lots of issues that can get in the way of Christian community. One is the belief that we don't need other Christians to grow and that we can do it alone without anyone else. But Paul says that we've got to pursue the same mind in Jesus, to stand against anything that will pull us away from genuine Christian relationships and community, because we need each other to grow. We all need to hold each other accountable.

This church of Philippi was perhaps Paul's favorite church and it is because they brought him so much joy. They labored in the work of the Lord and Paul reassures them that their names are written "in [God's] book of life," and God has no eraser for this book.

So what is there to rejoice? Real and lasting joy comes from the confidence that, no matter what happens, we are inseparably connected to God. In Germany, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was so disillusioned by the condition of the German church that he started a resistance movement, insisting that Christ, not Hitler, was the head of the church. By late 1942, seminaries had been closed. Even the underground seminary that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had started had been broken up. Like Paul, Bonhoeffer worked hard to maintain ties among other pastors and teachers, encouraging them by writing letters.

He would start those letters simply reporting the names of those from congregation who died. These people have been called to true joy, then he says, "This joy, which no one shall take from us, belongs not only to those who have been called home but also to us who are alive." Because he writes that joy abides with God—it comes down from God and embraces soul spirit and body. And where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads.

He says, "A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart's pain, anguish, and dread; it does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it." (<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/witness/last-writings-of-dietrich-bonhoeffer>)

I think Bonhoeffer and Paul are calling us to an experience beyond our external circumstances. I heard once, "Happiness is a warm puppy." But what happens when the puppy runs away? What

happens when the puppy dies? No, the kind of “happiness” that Paul has in view, is a joy and delight that he calls for in this passage is not tied to a warm puppy or money in the bank or a clean bill of health or peaceful family relationships. It’s tied to Jesus Christ. Paul experienced the nearness of God in Christ, even in prison in Rome. He commands us to rejoice! I don’t know if I was in prison, I don’t know if I was sitting in prison that I could write to you all and say, “Rejoice and be glad.” The reason Paul could do it, and I assume would be why I could as well, is because he believed, “the Lord is near.”

Throughout the Bible there are moments the people of God needed to remember that God was near and they were not alone. God had never left their side. They would turn to the familiar words of comfort Psalm 23. This psalm is not simply a text for funerals. We find comfort in it. It is something we pray, when we are in the valley. In the depths of despair, when evil and death and enemies surround us. I love the imagery of the shepherd, the rod and the staff, which reminds us of when we are in trouble and a sheep gets caught in the briars, and they pulled the sheep out. The rod would keep other animals out.

It is a promise that in the midst of whatever difficulty we might face, God was there. God is there. God brings hope, comfort, restoration, and peace. The peace of God in the passage phrase is used only there. That’s what I’ve been told and I even asked Jim McConnell and he said yes. That peace of God is so beyond our human understanding, but it is a gift that enables our hearts and minds so we can guard them because we are in Christ Jesus.

If Paul knew the Lord was near – why then would his next words be – Do not be anxious about anything. He’s saying the Lord is near, but don’t be anxious. I know the Lord is near, but sometimes I get anxious. Anxiety is a problem for a lot of people. Christians have anxiety. I had somebody tell me you can’t be a Christian because you have anxiety, and that you just need to pray more or have more faith. Bull...to use Paul’s words from last week. That’s not true.

You can be a Christian and have anxiety because we take on the worries of the world and carry them with us. There is help. Talk to someone and get help. It doesn’t mean you are lacking in your faith or your not praying enough. This past Thursday and Friday, I went to a conference about youth and cell phones, screen time, and video games and what it does to the brain. It was amazing. If I had it to do over again with my children, they wouldn’t have cell phones.

One of the things I got out of it was the anxiety that screens and social media present. It’s not just for teenagers either. We can get on our Facebook and get anxious about things as well. We are plagued with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing. Since we are plagued with those anxieties, Paul tells us that in everything, we can bring everything, no matter how trivial to the God who loves us and do that with thanksgiving. Bring our anxieties to God and do it with thanksgiving.

Rather than being anxious, we are to pray about anything. Prayer is not begging for help, but about talking to God honestly and lifting up our needs and our request. It’s learning how to cast all of our cares upon God, because we know God cares about us. Just like Paul taught - we need to focus our thoughts on what is excellent and true, holy and just. We are to practice what we have learned and received and heard from our mentors and teachers of the faith.

For me it really is practicing what I preach – and it is hard. This week we have seen things we wished we could erase from our memory – Children slain, women raped, families kidnapped – How can we rejoice seeing this?

Paul gives the Philippians the promise of God's peace that surpasses all understanding. We will NEVER understand why these things happen or what is going on. But we do know that Christ will meet us at the place of our worry, our place of grief, our place of pain, because God has descended to the depths of human despair and became one of us. By faith we share in the death and the resurrection of Jesus and God's life .

And in our own situations... we didn't always know what we are doing or how to do it, but by the grace of God, we've found ways to love, serve, and pray together. This is not because we have the answers... or because the work was easy...but because we know that God is with us and will help us through.

As people of faith, God is continually calling us to do hard things – to relinquishing worry, and instead rejoicing in God, praying always, being guarded by God's peace, and living by what is true, honorable, and just. Let it begin with us. Amen.