

Silver Linings
Philippians 4:4–14
Sunday, March 29, 2020 (Lent 5)

Over the past couple of weeks that we have been dealing with this virus, all of the messages that Ridgley and I have shared with you have been some form of, “Things are really hard right now. It’s scary and unsettling and lonely. We need to trust God to guide us through this.” They’ve all been focused on the *negative*; on what’s *wrong*. And that’s *okay*. That’s what was *needed* in these first few weeks – coming to grips with the unsettling reality of this new landscape that we have found ourselves in. But I don’t want to *stay* there anymore. When I was looking at the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for this week), the Old Testament reading was Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones; the prophet Ezekiel standing with God in this valley that is just *full* of bones from countless dead bodies. The New Testament reading was Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. And while both of those stories end with resurrection and new life, I did not want to spend one more week with images of death. We all know this is hard. We all know it stinks. *What else is there?*

And the thing that came to mind for me was this passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. There are three sections here that we’re going to look at. The first is verses 4–7, where Paul says, “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 thanksgiving 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.”

Rejoice in the Lord always. Don’t worry about anything. Pray about everything. And God will give you peace. Easy to *say*, much harder to *do*, right? I don’t know about you, but over the past

couple of weeks I have worried *a lot* and have not felt like *rejoicing* very much. So while Paul *talks* a mean game here, what does he know about the situation that *we* are facing?

Well, there are two things that are important to know that help us understand this section a little better. Paul starts off this chapter by saying, “I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” There are some translations that say, “I urge them to *live in harmony* in the Lord.” So there are two people in the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, women who were leaders of the church, and they are not of the same mind. They are not living in harmony. Paul has to *urge* them to do so. The church in Philippi is having problems. There is division. The church is not *whole*. And yet it is immediately after saying *that* that Paul says, “*Rejoice* in the Lord *always!*” Even when there are problems and things are not whole.

The other important thing to know is that Paul is writing this letter to the Philippians while under house arrest. The Romans have arrested him for his faith, and he cannot leave the house where he is staying. Paul is *quarantined*. He is living in *isolation*. He is practicing *social distancing*. (A quick aside on that. We need to change our language. We hear a lot of talk about “social distancing,” but that’s not what we are doing. We are *physically* distancing ourselves from each other. That is important and necessary. But we *are* not, we *cannot* socially distance ourselves from one another. As a church we have been finding ways to *connect* with each other across our isolation and physical distancing. Because that’s what we all need right now – to know that we are *socially* connected despite our *physical* distance.)

So Paul is writing this letter while under arrest, separated from the people he cares about, while he is awaiting trial and eventual execution. And he is *still* able to say, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice! The Lord is *near*. Don’t worry about *anything*, but pray about

everything, and God will give you *peace*.” Peace is possible, even in the midst of distance and death, when things are not whole.

So that’s the first part of what we’re looking at today. I want to skip the second part for now and look at the third section next. The third section is verses 10–14, where Paul writes, “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.”

Paul is writing to the Philippians because they apparently reached out to him. Biblical scholars think that the church collected some kind of offering for him and brought it to him while he was under house arrest. So he’s *thanking* them for it, but what he’s saying here is that this awful situation that he has found himself in has become an *opportunity* for the Philippians to show him their love. He says, “I didn’t actually *need* anything, because I’m good with having plenty or having little. I can do *all things* through Christ who gives me strength. But it was kind of you to share in my distress.”

We’ve been making phone calls all week. Me, Ridgley, the Elders and Deacons and some other leaders in the church. And whenever we reach out to someone and ask them if there is anything they need, almost everyone has said, “No, I have everything I need. But it was *so kind of you to call and ask*.” Most of us have what we physically need right now. (And if you *don’t*, please call or email me or Ridgley and let us know.) But what we’re appreciative for is the phone calls

and the emails and the love and care that we have all been able to show each other in the midst of this. This awful situation has become an *opportunity* for us to show our love and share in the distress of others.

And that actually leads me back to the second section, verses 8 and 9, where Paul writes, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Every night when our kids go to bed, we say prayers together, and then we ask each of them, “What are you grateful for today?” Sometimes it’s really easy for them. “I’m grateful that we got to have a yummy dinner.” “I’m grateful that I got to play with my friends.” But sometimes it’s hard for them. Sometimes they get so focused on a *bad* thing that happened to them during the day that they can’t see anything else. There have been times when I asked what they were grateful for, and one of them said, “Pretty much *nothing* today.” I asked *why*, and they told me about these bad things that had happened. I said, “Yeah, that is hard. But even with all those bad things happening, there *must* have been at least one *good* thing that happened today. Even if it’s really tiny.” They said, “I got to go outside and play.” So I said, “Yes! Let’s celebrate *that* and give thanks to God for *that*!” We want them to end each day, no matter how tough it was, focusing on the *good* things and the *blessings* that are in their lives.

That’s what Paul is telling us here. “Focus on the good things and the blessings that are in your life.” It’s not some kind of Pollyannish mindset where we live in denial and ignore any problems and say, “Everything’s great!” Paul *knows* that everything is not great. The Philippians know

that everything is not great. *We* know that everything is not great. But *this* is saying, “In the midst of this, where are God’s blessings? What can I focus my heart and mind on so that I’m not overwhelmed with all the other stuff? What can I give thanks for?” And that’s the question that I want all of us to keep asking throughout all of this. *Where are the blessings? What can we give thanks for?*

When I look back over these past two weeks, I cannot tell you the last time I spent this much concentrated time with my family. I am more involved in my kids’ schooling than I have ever been. We start off each morning with a time of worship together, where we sing a song, read a Bible story, and pray together. We’ve never done that before. We go for walks or bike rides together every afternoon. And when we go around the neighborhood, there are families out in their yards playing. We all say hi to each other and stop to talk (with enough distance between us). We’ve met so many new neighbors. There are chalk drawings at the end of driveways all over our neighborhood that say things like, “You are not alone,” “We can do this,” “We are with you.”

As a church we are finding ways to connect through technology so that we can keep meeting and praying and worshipping together. I *hope* it’s helping us see that the church is not a *building*, it is the *people*. And we are *reconnecting* with each other through phone calls. There is this renewed sense of community among us in which people are looking out for each other, taking *care* of each other.

I look at the world around us. I saw a story the other day about how the water in the canals in Venice, Italy is *clear* for the first time that anyone can remember, because there are no boats traveling in it. People can see to the bottom; they can see *fish* swimming. In Italy, dolphins have

started coming closer to the coast than they ever have before. Japan has deer roaming the streets, and in Thailand there are *monkeys* all over the streets because there are no people to scare them off. China has had record breaking cuts in pollution, and people have talked about seeing the *stars* at night for the first time in *years*. The Earth is *healing itself*.

Good things *can* come out of this. There *are* blessings in the midst of this horrible situation. It's like the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph's brothers hated him, so they attacked him and sold him off as a slave in Egypt. But he ends up rising in power and becomes second in command to Pharaoh and ends up saving his brothers' lives when a famine comes upon the land. And at the end of the story, he is reunited with his brothers, and he says to them, "Even though you intended to do *harm* to me, God intended it for *good*." It's like Paul says to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." It's not that God *caused* those bad things (or *this* one), but that God can *take* the bad things that happen – the pain and suffering and brokenness of life – and *use it* to advance God's purposes in this world and in our lives.

After all, this is the season of Lent, when we remember how God took the worst possible situation – the betrayal and crucifixion and death of Christ – and *used it* to bring about *salvation* and *resurrection* and *new life*. Where will *we* experience resurrection and new life in this?

I came across a poem this past week by an author named Donna Ashworth:

History will remember when the world stopped
And the flights stayed on the ground
And the cars parked in the street
And the trains didn't run.

History will remember when the schools closed
And the children stayed indoors
And the medical staff walked towards the fire

And they didn't run.

History will remember when the people sang
On their balconies, in isolation
But so very much together
In courage and song.

History will remember when the people fought
For their old and their weak
Protected the vulnerable
By doing nothing at all.

History will remember when the virus left
And the houses opened
And the people came out
And hugged and kissed
And started again

Kinder than before.

When this virus leaves – and it *will* leave – what kind of people will we be? Will we go back to our lives, our screens, shut the doors, shut each other out? Or will we keep calling and walking and riding our bikes and playing in the yard and writing on our driveways and talking to our neighbors and worshipping and praying and teaching our children? Will we let this make us the kind of people that we always *wanted* to be before?

There *are* blessings in this, as hard as it is. Keep looking for them and focusing on them – on the things that are true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and worthy of praise. Keep thinking about *these things*, and the God of peace will be with you.

Amen.