

## Philippians 4:1-9 “Think About These Things”

Since my return from Sabbatical, I’ve been setting aside a portion of my sermons to tell Sabbatical stories. You all are nice enough to grant me a Sabbatical, so it’s only fair that I let you know about how I spent my time. But I feel like I’ve spent a lot of time talking about my Sabbatical *activities*. I want to make sure I balance that out with some *reflections* too. To do that, I’ve got to take you all back to the last Sabbatical I took in the summer of 2016. That one started on the second week in July and ended on the second week of October. During that 2016 Sabbatical, I did a lot more traveling and camping than I did this past summer. I also made a decision to engage in a personal “news blackout.” Other than an occasional peek into local news and weather reports, I deliberately avoided big-picture national news because I wanted to take a break from my obsessive consumption of news-related podcasts. So for the majority of the summer of 2016, I was out grubbing around in the great outdoors oblivious to what was going on in the “real world” at least as far as national news goes. It’s also worth noting that I started my news blackout the *first* week of July because I was the director of high school camp at CGC. So technically, I spent *13 weeks* without national news. And again, this was the summer of 2016 we’re talking about, okay? So when I came back from Sabbatical and started tuning in to the news again, I wasn’t sure whether I was *happy* or *remorseful* that I gave up news for 13 weeks. Part of me even wondered if I’d been abducted by aliens on one of my camping trips and was placed in some weird bizarro-world simulation just to gauge my reaction. Either way, I learned my lesson. This time around I decided *not* to participate in a news blackout. I also didn’t do as much camping and when I did, I kept my eyes glued to the sky. And I read. A lot.

My reading list this past summer consisted of a variety of different books from different genres and authors. I read the memoir of a woman who was raised and home-schooled in a cultish survivalist community who eventually became a research fellow at Harvard University. I read a great book on spirituality and spiritual communities by Rain Wilson, the

guy who played Dwight on *The Office*. I read a mostly light-hearted book about a widowed chemist who was talked into hosting a cooking show in the 1960s. I read a mind-blowing graphic novel about humanity's search for meaning written by a cultural anthropologist and illustrated by an award-winning cartoonist. Sandhya Jha, a former Disciples associate regional minister here in NorCal, wrote a book about the importance of recognizing how we fit into the story of our ancestral heritage. Steve Brydon, who was here in church last week with his wife Pam, wrote a history book about how propaganda has been used during times of war. Most of the books I read, however, related to the topic of how and why we have become so deeply polarized both in our nation and our churches. The worst of these books were just rants by authors who think we just need to go back to the "good ol' days" even if their idea of what the "good old days" were ended up being terrible for so many people. The best of these books were written by thoughtful scholars and theologians who encouraged their readers to engage in healthy self-reflection. We all like to think we're the heroes of our own story, but good theology demands that we practice prayerful self-reflection. As I often say, we need to stop, take a breath, examine our lives and ask, "Am I playing the part of Moses, or am I the Pharaoh?" Or, "Am I on Jesus' side or Caesar's side in this situation?"

I've learned from experience that self-reflection without prayer often leads to depression, so I made sure that in my travels, in my studies, in my planning, and in my interaction with others I was engaged in prayer. That brings us to the scripture lesson that Connie read earlier in the service. This is the third week in a row that we're reading from the Book of Philippians. As many of you know, this is my favorite of Paul's epistles, or letters to the early churches. This book was written to either a single church or a cluster of churches in the city of Philippi which by today's maps is in the northeast panhandle of Greece. I like Philippians because it's probably one of the most encouraging letters that Paul wrote to the churches under his care. In most of his other letters, Paul has to flex his muscles and use his conflict resolution skills to make sure the church doesn't collapse. A bird's eye glance of the whole letter indicates

that the church in Philippi seems to be doing well because he heaps a lot of praise on them for being a church who “gets it.” The first few sentences of this passage, however, appears to be a word of encouragement directed toward two women, Euodia and Syntyche. It sounds like the women might be in conflict because Paul encourages them to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” He even calls on someone in the church leadership to “help these women.” Now, I don’t get the impression that there was any kind of serious conflict that threatened the ministry and mission of the church. It wasn’t a big blow-up or anything. Maybe they just had a little “church spat” over something that seems inconsequential in the big picture, but still ... you don’t want a little spat to *grow into* something bigger, so it’s best to deal with it now so that the work of the gospel can continue. Then Paul shifts gears and says, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

“Do not worry about anything.” That’s not easy for some folks. I know it’s not easy for me. If there was a competition for worrying or catastrophizing, I would at the very least a bronze medalist. My spiritual director tells me it’s because I have a lousy abundance consciousness. In other words, I lack faith that God will provide a way or the tools to work through a difficult situation. At first, I dismissed that notion, but then I realized that *a lot of things* I worry about are situations I have little or no control over. I worry about the safety of my son who serves in the Navy. I worry that my education and training was a waste of time or that I have no marketable skills to make a decent contribution to society. I worry about whether I have enough siracha sauce, or duct tape, or peanut butter in the house. And that’s just the little stuff. In the big picture I worry that the people of our world have all lost their minds and that we’re on an inescapable path to self-destruction or self-obliteration. I worry about the future generations of my family and what’s in store for them because the current generations can’t stop fighting with each other long enough to address even our simplest challenges.

And yet here's Paul over here in Philippians saying, "Rejoice" and "do not worry about anything." Sounds like that Bobby McFerrin song from the 80s, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." I prefer Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds," because ... you know ... Bob Marley, right Kevin? Of course, my favorite is the crushingly cynical song, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" from the movie *The Life of Brian* where a group of first-century Jewish dissidents are hanging on crosses whistling and singing,

"If life seems jolly rotten, There's something you've forgotten, and that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing. When you're feeling in the dumps  
don't be silly chumps, Just purse your lips and whistle, that's the thing - And always look on the bright side of life."

When you pause and reflect on Paul's words, you realize he's not just offering platitudes. He's not saying, "Don't worry, be happy." He's saying that joy comes with prayer and thanksgiving. It's not something you muster on your own through sheer willpower. It's something you cultivate. He 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." You don't have to put on a fake smile or be in denial about the things that worry you. Worry is going to happen whether we want it or not. In fact, sometimes I worry more when someone starts a sentence with, "Now, I don't want you to worry about this but ..." For Paul, it's all about your thinking. You want to avoid "stinkin' thinkin'" by fortifying your mind with that which is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable.

So whenever I start manifesting a lousy abundance consciousness, Amber, my spiritual director, tells me to make a list of gratitudes. Now, if you ask me to make a list of gratitudes on the spot at any given moment, I could do it. I will serve you a vanilla-flavored list of all the

things that you're supposed to say at the Thanksgiving dinner table every year. "I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful for my friends. I'm thankful for my dogs. I'm thankful for my church. I'm thankful for where we live. I'm thankful that the turkey isn't dry and there's lots of pumpkin pie." But Amber is a smart cookie and she doesn't let me get away with serving up vanilla anything. Nothing is easy with her. In the spring of 2019, we were on month number six of dealing with the aftermath of the Camp Fire. Not only were we sharing our building with another church, we were trying to run the church from the little office by the chapel because our office and a quarter of our facilities were undergoing repairs from the flood we had after a huge downpour. One day Amber said, "When you get up in the morning, before you do anything ... before you even get out of bed, I want you to text me what you are grateful for today. No Thanksgiving dinner table gratitudes. No repeats. Tell me the first thing you are grateful for, and I'll tell you mine." On a decent day, I could conjure one up. On a bad day, I'd try something like, "I'm grateful for you for challenging me to do this." "Bzzzzt! I'm grateful for you too, Jesse. Try again." Sometimes it's hard to be grateful, especially when life is extra challenging and your lousy abundance consciousness kicks in and you're scared.

Diana Butler-Bass wrote a book about gratitude a few years ago called, *Grateful*. She believes that stopping and savoring what's good in the world gives us the motivation to keep working for good. If you lose this ability to savor life, your motivation goes sour. She goes on to say that part of love and gratitude in difficult times is that nobody should stand over someone else and say, "You must be grateful!" or "You must love so-and-so." Savoring life is an invitation into wrestling through the suffering of the world and discovering compassion and thanksgiving *through* the pain. All the wise theologians, mystics, and spiritual leaders throughout history who have been in communities that have been oppressed know that gratitude isn't something you tell other people to do, it's something that people discover for themselves on this journey of wonder that we call life. You should never tell anyone who is suffering that they have to feel some way. But, as Paul did with the church in

Philippi, we should always as people of faith, be holding forth invitations into God's best dream for us, and that is to live without fear. As he wrote, "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."