

## Philippians 4:1–9

<sup>4</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

### Exhortations

<sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup>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.

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This morning I would like for us to think about peace together, and I would like to begin this reflection with prayer. There will be a few brief prayers interspersed in the sermon to help center us, and help us to not just think about peace but engage in a practice that can lead to peace. So let's begin with part of a prayer familiar to many of us, written by St. Francis of Assisi:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.”

I have a very brief, silent survey question to ask you this morning – and that is this: When is the last time you felt either stressed, anxious, fearful, and/or uncertain? Perhaps I'm speaking from a position too close to my grad student perspective – October is a month of midterms, after all! – but I think that there has been a lot of anxiety sort of ‘in the air’ lately for a large group of diverse people. There are large-scale protests underway, continuing economic tensions and political polarizations – not to mention all of the more specific and perhaps personal stressors we

carry with us, wrapped up in the fabric of the many relationships we belong to and care deeply about.

Of course stress is not a new phenomenon in the world...this is not the first or the last time we've felt it, and I'm sure this is not the first sermon about it! I'm not suggesting that any stress we have today is uniquely stressful; but sometimes it is good for us as human beings to take a moment and realize that even if *we* aren't feeling anxious, if we just lift our gaze we'll soon see numerous people who could use a hand, or a friend, or a little taste of elusive stillness. Safe to say I've been thinking about stress this week. And as I have been lost in these thoughts, I have learned a few things.

First, I am intrigued by, enamored with, and intensely curious about the peace of God. Sometimes it is really helpful for me to read a scripture passage and identify what phrase or words stand out – that too can be a way of engaging in prayer! While there are several verses of this passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians that are familiar and interesting to me, the phrase, "the peace of God" and later on, "the God of peace" stand out as particularly important, particularly difficult to grasp, name, or describe. What is "the peace of God"? Can we and our neighbors throughout the world experience it today?

I received an e-mail this week from one of my colleagues at Harvard Divinity School, Dave Woessner, which I think resonates with our desires for a peace that affects both our inner and outer situations. Dave wrote movingly, urging students to at least go and witness the protests happening in Boston right now. I asked him if I could share with you some of what he wrote, and he agreed. Speaking of the occupy Boston protests, Dave wrote, "Many of your colleagues, skeptical or curious at first, have gone down and been changed by it, in unpredictable ways. There is now an inter-religious tent that welcomes all traditions in prayer, meditation, song, chant, and yoga. We'll be having Yom Kippur services this Saturday. Eucharist will be offered in the days to come. Again, it's something to see and feel. This could be one of the pivotal moments of the decade, if not the generation, and, frankly, as religious leaders (or future ones), as scholars, and even as citizens, we must stand in witness, with our own eyes. Whether you'd like to be more involved is up to you. But at least come and see."

Peace, as we know, has so many components, so many meanings. Inner and outer conditions for peace often have much to do with one another, and I think Dave's e-mail has a lot in common with the meanings of peace that get picked up in this brief passage that Paul writes. For example, in verse 2 Paul says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord" (Phil 4:2). We do not know what these women disagree about – perhaps they are on opposite sides of their own local protest – but we do learn that Paul calls them "co-workers" who "have struggled beside [him] in the work of the gospel," and for this reason their peaceable reconciliation is a priority to him (Phil 4:3). One primary meaning of peace, of course, means peaceful living, and such living is a centrally important for the life Christ calls us to live.

Peace also has something to do with our inward lives, and this is what Paul is able to testify to and teach about in the next part of the passage. It is so interesting to remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison. Paul is imprisoned more than once for his work as an evangelist, and while we don't know too many specific details about where he is and exactly why, we do

know that these imprisonments result as both the Roman Empire and other members of Paul's Jewish community struggle to know how to respond to Paul as the political *and* religious actor that he is. Paul's words, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice," take on a new ring when sung through prison bars (Phil 4:4).

So what can Paul's advice in this passage teach us about peace? What do his words concerning Euodia and Syntyche, rejoicing, gentleness, or prayer – all of which he brings up as teachings in this passage, and which we will look at more in depth – have to do with the God of peace? Are these simply a list of unconnected exhortations, things that Paul thinks the Philippian community should do? Or is he outlining a practical theology for how to gain "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [and which he claims] will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus"?

This is a live question for me, one that I think it is worth considering! It's ultimately a question of faith through the ages, and how we connect to God, the God who we are gathered here today to worship, to commune with, and to see in relationship to others. Like the Exodus community and the Philippians, we face the challenging truth that we serve an invisible God who is nevertheless near us. A God who shows up for us in the world, through repeated covenants, through Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and even by grace through community since we were created in God's image.

As people who in many cases rely heavily on the visible and the physical as reality, how do we live without forgetting this God? How do we keep from making a golden calf for ourselves, as the Israelites do when they begin to believe themselves abandoned in the desert? Or how do we keep from despairing in prison, fighting with our sisters and brothers, or becoming overwhelmed by stress when we lose sight of the God with us and God for us, and yet the God still coming into the world?

To talk about the peace of God, Paul points us to where God shows up among us, and also to a God that we need to intentionally remember. These seem like two different things in a way, don't they? But this is the way of the God of peace – the non-coercive, supremely loving God who yearns for our wholeness.

The second prayer I'd like to invite us to participate in is known as a breath prayer – many of you may have done this before, but I owe what I know about this prayer to my wonderfully wise candidacy mentor. She explained the process to me by saying that first you think of a name for God that is particularly meaningful for you, and you think of that name as you inhale. Then you think of a brief request, or mantra, and say that as you exhale.

Just to give you an example to go from, I'll share mine with you. I say "Adonai, let me be still." Stillness in my tendency for busy-ness is always a blessing, always a time when I can "be still and know God." So I invite you to try it, breathe in thinking of a way to address God, and breathe out your supplication, your prayer. [Wait]. I love this way of praying – it literally

travels with us wherever we go, and it is a way to pray without ceasing, and let prayer stay with us naturally throughout the day. Amen!

Hear the way Paul leads up to talking about God's peace again: After urging Euodia and Syntyche to be of one mind in the Lord (Phil 4:2), Paul says this "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:4-7).

Prioritize peaceful relationships in community, Paul says. Rejoice always in the Lord, (and I would add, when rejoicing is too hard, rely on that community that you have worked hard to be a part of to get you through). Be known for your gentleness more than anything else, and pray! Yes, the peace of God surpasses all understanding, we are told, but it is not so remote as to be unreachable, not so far away as to have no real meaning or effect on our lives – inner and outer.

One funny thing about preaching is what the sermon does to you as you struggle to form it, and as a result of those grapplings this week I have a story to share with you today. It doesn't take very long to tell, but it was a humbling story for me, and I think it's important when we talk about peace, particularly the peace of God, to acknowledge that our subject really does extend beyond our understanding – certainly I don't walk around peaceful all the time. Enough stalling though, here's the story: I left the house Tuesday morning with two different shoes on. They were both tennis shoes, and thankfully I had a right shoe on my right foot, and a left shoe on my left foot, but they were definitely from different pairs.

I only realized my mishap ten minutes into my walk from home on my way to work, and turning around was the last thing I wanted to do. I had kind of sprained my knee, I was stressed out anyway and looking forward to walking slowly, but instead I had to turn around and go change my shoes. When I got there I was irritable, I was limping from my hurry, and I snapped at my husband as if he had anything to do with my putting the wrong shoes on. As I left the house for the second time, a fluster of stress and repentance for my misplaced frustration, I smiled ruefully as this week's sermon title popped into my mind – "the peace of God." How am I going to preach on that?

It occurred to me that it's probably a very good thing that I asked myself that question, because peace is not something we take lightly...it's something we need way too much to take or treat it lightly. We desperately need peace in our world, peace in our relationships, peace in our souls, and all too often we do not find it. As people of faith, how do we call on the God of peace when peace is 1) so hard to find, and 2), not something that comes so naturally to us. "Lord, make me and Instrument of thy peace," we prayed earlier. There is so much truth expressed in this prayer. We need God to help us become instruments of that peace which Paul describes to us. As much good as we can do, as many times as we can take the grace that God has put in our lives and translate that into love and peace shown to others, it's a way of being that is more difficult to sustain than our good intentions might suggest. We can be unpeaceful as quickly and casually as we can put on a mis-matched pair of shoes.

So it's important to bring ourselves into humbling reality when we talk about our yearning for peace, this peace of God that we long for and love, but so often lose sight of in our everyday humanity. But here is some good news about a life of faith in this God we serve, the God of peace: I remain convinced that God loves us in a way that makes a *difference* in our lives - even when our lives are extremely chaotic and crowded, even when we lose sight of 'our better selves.' And I believe that one of the ways that God does this is by shaping communities of faith into beacons, examples, and witnesses to the peace of God.

Reconciliation in community, rejoicing, gentleness, prayer...it seems to me that Paul's exhortations might not be so random after all. All of these ways of being have the potential to shape us into peacemakers, blessings for the world around us which needs the peace of God *so intensely* - but also to give us people to turn to when we ourselves need to be the recipients of that peace. Once again, we see the importance of community, and the wisdom of God who has called us to be in one another's care, learning to love and serve God by loving and serving one another.

At the end of the lectionary passage today, Paul offers a reprise of instructions and again assures the Philippians of God's peaceful presence available to them. With a beautiful turn of phrase, he says, "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. <sup>9</sup>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" (Phil 4:8-9).

Surely we can think of *something* that is excellent, *something* that is worthy of praise...when we cannot we are in despair, and need to rely on those who are close to us to show us God's peace. But in the meantime, we need to have the spiritual resources to show and even be an extension of that peace to others, and Paul's words are guiding us in one way to do that well!

As you go about your week, be attentive to the places in your life that you need peace, and look around to see how you can be an extension of God's peace to those close to you, and in the world more broadly. God can use simple acts, simple choices in our thinking and living to bring about profound peace in a hurting, busy, and stressed out world. Praise God!

If you would join me once more in prayer, we will close with these words:

Gracious God, help us to have a little more love in moments where disagreements are sharp, a little more joy in spite of the prisons and setbacks we encounter, a little more gentleness where we might otherwise speak or act hastily, a little more patience and willingness to pray to you, and a little more understanding of your peace. Help us to be still, and know you are God.

[Pause] Lead us as we go forth from this place to be instruments of your peace in all the world, that we may be true disciples of Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, amen.