

Anxiously Anxious

[Text - Philippians 4:4-9]

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Last Sunday, my sermon evolved from some of the issues we explored in last week's Confirmation Class Retreat. And this Sunday's theme comes from materials we covered in this week's Vacation Bible School. So...am I a shrewd steward of the Sacred Scriptures, efficiently utilizing my time and resources; or am I just a pathetically lazy preacher, halfheartedly phoning it in? To find out, I guess you'll all have to come back every Sunday! Meanwhile, today I'm going to talk about how faith and focus, courage and *encouragement* can help us deal with Life's greatest problems, anxieties, and fears.

In Vacation Bible School, we learned how David bravely confronts Goliath; Deborah wisely leads the Israelites; blind Bartimaeus boldly calls-out to Jesus for help; and how Saul, the persecutor of Christians, becomes Saint Paul - the shrewdly efficient Christian evangelist. In each of these stories, there's a key moment when the individual involved experiences a crucial shift in his or her attitude which helps that person overcome a seemingly insurmountable problem. And while we don't have time to look at each narrative, I think we can get a good sense of what helped each person turn that critical corner, by reflecting on a passage from Saint Paul's letter to the Philippian Church. Most importantly, though, I believe that Paul's advice to the Philippians can be truly beneficial for you and me today.

Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, Rejoice! The Lord is near! Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to the Holy One. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

These are highly encouraging words! However, you and I live in highly complex, dangerous, and anxious times. So perhaps Paul's advise may seem a bit outdated, or even a little naive to us today. Yet there

were certainly plenty of problems, crises, and concerns in Paul's own life to produce an extremely high level of anxiety. As he traveled throughout the Mediterranean world, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, Paul endured shipwrecks, cold and hunger, imprisonments, beatings and stonings, prejudice and persecution, natural dangers and human induced distress. He associated with many of the poor, struggling and disenfranchised people of society, and he himself had very little in terms of earthly riches or material possessions.

Yet one thing Paul does possess, is an amazingly deep and rich relationship with the Sacred Source of Life - the Infinite Holy One - who abundantly provides all those things that we truly need: compassion and community, hope and strength, inner-peace and authentic wholeness. By focusing on those things, Paul is able to live a life which is remarkably joyful and productive, meaningful and positive. A life which fearlessly faces and embraces *all of Life* - trusting that the Holy One who makes us all, ultimately takes care of us all. And it's this fundamental *trust* - that our Creative Source has a decisive say in how Life's Story begins, continues, and concludes - that gives Paul this amazing spirit of confidence and joy, regardless of the circumstances that surround him.

Paul's remarkable mission and ministry, reveal that the words he writes, are definitely words that also guide and influence his entire life: "Rejoice in the Lord always...Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known to the Holy One."

Now this doesn't mean that as people of faith you and I simply close our eyes and pray our problems away! Living faithfully isn't about being passively oblivious to the real problems and dangers that Life presents. It's about actively seeking and engaging in a Divine purpose for our lives. It's about prayerfully and faithfully taking-on those things that we can actually impact, rather than just angrily raging against those things over which we have absolutely no control.

I know that sometimes I can waste a lot of time anxiously worrying about things that may - or may *not* even -happen! This leaves me far less time and energy to deal with those real Life issues that actually require my attention. Unfortunately, once my mind latches-onto one of those hypothetical happenings, it's really hard to let it go. [I can even start to obsess about how obsessive I'm being!] This is where Paul's wonderfully worded advice to the Philippians can help me break-free from that vicious vortex:

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!"

So much of what assails us from the multiple media that we are so connected to these days, is intentionally negative and sensationalized, divisive and deceptive. This is one of the many reasons that I truly cherish the time that I spend worshiping, working, studying, praying, playing, or just being with my Family of Faith. Sure, sometimes we get into those deep issues, problems and worries of the world around us; and it's important that we do! And sometimes some of us [me, for instance] can allow our righteous anger or negativity send us spiraling over the top! Fortunately, however, you and I patiently and persistently reel one another back in; and together we stay grounded in that positive and compassionate foundation of our Faith.

Anxiety, anger and fear often are the antithesis of genuine faith. With *faith*, you and I can face all of Life's problems, with an underlying trust that there is an Infinite, Divine Power that is with us in that present moment, and which will sustain us into the unknown future. So rather than anxiously speculating about all the terrible things which *may* happen, you and I can trust that our Loving, Creative Source is with us, and within us, in every situation we will ever face. Believing that, truly does make all the difference in the world! "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, *will* keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

So I will say it again, Rejoice!