

Last week we kicked off our new sermon series entitled: “The Enemies of Gratitude”- where we are practicing gratitude by calling out the things that often keep us from being truly grateful. Today’s enemy of gratitude is **worry**, and the text we’re reading is Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Before we delve in though, first a pastoral word. Yesterday was World Mental Health Day. Mental health is one of the most neglected and stigmatized areas of public health. Mental health is just as important as physical health, as they are connected. Mental health is challenging enough and then to add the cost of living rising, and much despair in our world and, it is a lot. I want to reiterate that when I talk about worry it’s a general worry not a worry that comes with an anxiety disorder or other mental illness. If you are struggling with your mental health, please reach out to someone- a friend, one of our social workers or case managers, me, Pastor Trevor, or any of our staff or other professionals. There is nothing to be ashamed of. We walk around talking about treating our heart disease but struggle to talk about treatments for depression. Please know that you aren’t alone, there is help and God loves you. **And now a little background in our scripture passage today. Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony. The Emperor at the time of Paul’s writing was Caesar Augustus. Philippi, the site of an important military victory for Caesar Augustus, housed “monuments celebrating imperial power set amid shrines and temples dedicated to various deities, including the emperor himself. I don’t know if the shrines were made of gold or not, but I digress. In a world where the emperor was proclaimed ‘savior,’ and offered ‘salvation’ in exchange for ‘faith,’ the Apostle Paul announces the ‘good

news' of the lordship not of Caesar but of the crucified Galilean, Jesus the Christ" (*The Discipleship Study Bible (TDSB*, p.1998)). Oh, and did I mention that Paul is writing from a prison? "He was being held in a Roman prison as a disrupter, a traitor, and a preacher of the criminal Jesus. He literally doesn't know what the Romans are going to do with him. Paul, Timothy, Silas had helped to found the church there, and the members of the Philippian church hold a special place in Paul's heart. In the beginning of his letter, Paul speaks of his own existence hanging between life and death: "I am hard pressed between the two." He shares his fears and doubts- as well as his will to live- with his friends in Philippi, who may be facing down Roman persecution as a community and vicariously sharing in Paul's imprisonment. They, too, are suffering in the painful space between living and dying. Paul reminds them *not* to tear each other to shreds while the greater enemy is at their door. And, it is in the midst of not knowing if the next guard to visit the door of his cell will lead him to the executioner, that Paul bursts forth in praise of beauty. *How should we live when death is at hand? Gratefully*" (Diana Butler Bass, [link](#)). So...Paul reminds that to not spend their energy on worrying; spend it on rejoicing. Paul reminds them that it is very different being a disciple of Christ than simply being a citizen of Rome. As followers of Christ, they are called to live counter-culturally- to live differently from the ways of the Roman world or the world today. Here Paul is wrapping up his letter by summing up the key themes of how to live with faith in Jesus Christ. But before we read this morning's Scripture, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Read Philippians 4:1-9. **READ.**

I've been going through some old boxes and came across a note my mom wrote me when I left home some years ago. It had three things listed. 1) You are never alone. 2) We will always love you. 3) Philippians 4:6-7. My wise mom didn't write the words to the Scripture verses so that I would have to look it up or better yet commit them to heart. I wonder if my mom also thought I could use some practical advice for a life centered in Christ? "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be known to God" (Phil. 4:6-7). Don't worry about a ting 'cause every little ting is gonna be alright- now, Paul didn't say that. Bob Marley did. Those are fun words to sing, especially in reggae style, yet how practical are these words to live?! Easier said than done, right? As a matter of fact, this may be one of the hardest of all biblical instructions to keep. After all, we are human, and we worry. Worry asks, "What if everything goes wrong?" Gratitude asks, "Where is God already at work?" Friends, worry makes us forget what we already know about God such as "The Lord is near" (v.5). Our hope doesn't rest on our ability to control circumstances. It rests on the character and providence of God. **Worry is the imagination trying to control a future that belongs to God.** Some of us worry about finding a place to live or a job or about getting sick or living with a disease or a bad relationship or we worry about the addiction that eats at us or our loved ones or we worry about whether we can pay our bills, or that our children won't be safe or if we'll ever make a difference in this world. Some of us worry about what is happening in our country and the world...racial discrimination, global warming, growing gap in affordable housing, growing polarization, the upcoming election, you name it.

Worry has become an industry. Every time we doomscroll, we train our minds to expect catastrophe. But with God, gratitude interrupts the cycle: “Look again,” Paul is telling them. God is here! And Paul has some street cred, as he was writing these words while he was in prison...on death row for preaching the gospel. Paul isn’t telling us to do things the Bobby McFerrin style- don’t worry, be happy. No. He has seen up close the pain and evil in this world. “More than likely, he is just as overwhelmed by the evil that grips God’s creation; he just believes in another story” (*Lectionary Sermon Series, Vol. 1*, Brian Erikson). These aren’t clichés or timeless platitudes that Paul is writing nor is he being a Pollyanna. These verses not only reveal something about God; they also empower us in difficult times. Paul tells the Philippians and us that speaking with God, giving God thanks and letting our needs be known to God, allow us to experience a peace that goes beyond our own understanding, outside of what we can even begin to imagine. When we face hardship or feel overwhelmed by life, we’re reminded here to authentically turn to a God who is near and will not forsake us. I don’t know about you, but when I worry a lot, I tend to lose my focus on God and what God has done, is doing and will do.

Paul, as a follower of Christ, sees things in a different reality, in spite of his circumstances. He sees the reality of God’s redemption in Jesus, already here and still drawing near. “Stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved,” Paul writes (4:1). He begins by calling out two women who are in a disagreement. We aren’t told what that disagreement is but Paul uses the same language he used earlier in his letter to talk about unity-

“be of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2). He goes on to identify these women as two of those who have struggled beside him in the work of the gospel- did you catch that? Two women ministering alongside Paul but again, I digress. It’s as if Paul knows that these two women, as well as everyone else in the community of faith, needed to be reminded that we all have unity in Jesus Christ. And then Paul tells them to Rejoice!- and then he repeats himself. “Again, I say rejoice” (v. 4). This was Paul’s third time telling this community to rejoice (vv. 2:18, 3:1). So what is there to rejoice? A reminder is also needed that our joy is not grounded in the events of the day; our joy is grounded in Jesus Christ. One scholar put it this way: “Joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances” (*FOW*, Nathan Eddy). “Paul doesn’t say, ‘Be joyful, because things are going well;’ for Paul, nothing is going well. He doesn’t say, rejoice in your family, or in your job, or in your well-being, or in the fact that you live free from all dangers. He says, ‘Rejoice in the Lord’” (Erikson). Real and lasting joy comes from the confidence that, no matter what happens in our circumstances, we are inseparably connected to and redeemed by a loving God. Paul reminds his beloved Philippians that their concerns (as well as ours) are to be addressed not by worrying about them, but by practicing gratitude through the disciplines of prayer and rejoicing.

Look around us! There’s plenty to worry about, as there was in Paul’s day. For worry quickly turns possibilities into certainties, and we often fail to see the bigger picture. So don’t let worry have the final word. Many of us wonder, “What can we do to worry less and be more at

peace?” Paul offers a practice: prayer. He writes, *In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (v. 6). Notice the little phrase we can easily miss: “with thanksgiving.” Paul doesn’t say, *Don’t bring your fears to God*. Bring them. But bring them with thanksgiving. Gratitude doesn’t deny the problem. Gratitude refuses to let the problem become bigger than God. Paul invites us to pray bringing everything, no matter how big or small to a God who loves us. Praying doesn’t need to be a grand gesture. It doesn’t need a script or the right words. Prayer is a conversation between you and God. No matter how hard we try, we cannot free ourselves from worry on our own. In Christ, God is with us and God’s peace guards our minds and hearts. This is the source of our joy! As with last week, these words of Scripture are again not about less stress but about more trust. We become more free from worry when we learn to trust God more. Prayer lifts us above our narrow focus and helps to see more clearly. It also reminds us who and whose we are: children of God who are deeply loved. As followers of Christ, we move from “everything is going to be fine” to “whatever happens, God is still God.” Some of you may have heard the phrase, “Let go and let God.” I confess that sometimes I really struggle with this concept- though in my heart I understand the message. You see- I like to be in control, and letting go is not my forte. What about you? I saw a meme the other day with a picture of a beautiful tree that read, “The trees are about to show you just how beautiful letting go can be.” It is that time of year, isn’t it?! “Letting go of our worry is not a matter of ignoring what’s wrong; it’s a confidence in what is right. It’s dropping anchor in the good news of

Jesus Christ rather than waiting for the news of the world to calm us down” (Erikson). It is letting go of the misnomer that you or anyone other than Christ is your Savior. Letting go involves a lot of trust as well as a new perspective. We can’t promise that **every little thing** will be all right. Some things aren’t all right. Some things break our hearts. Some prayers aren’t answered the way we want. And as Christians, we make a deeper claim: even when every little thing isn’t all right, the Lord is near. Not someday. Not when we finally get everything figured out. The Lord is near- right here, right now. And because God is near, we can pray. Because God is near, we can give thanks. Because God is near, we can release what we cannot control. Because God is near, there can be peace standing watch over a mind that cannot stop worrying. Worry says: “I need to know what happens next.” Faith says: “I know Who holds what happens next.” Worry says: “What if everything goes wrong?” Gratitude says: “Look at what God has already done.” So pay attention to what we are paying attention to! Our culture has algorithms designed to keep us angry, afraid, outraged, and anxious. Paul offers us a different algorithm. Is it true? Honorable? Just? Lovely? Worthy of Praise? This doesn’t mean ignoring what’s wrong; it means refusing to become so consumed by it that we become incapable of seeing what is good, beautiful, faithful, and holy. Gratitude, you see, is an act of intention and attention. The antidote to worry isn’t simply thinking differently; it’s practicing differently. And that is what we’re going to today for our Affirmation of Faith. Instead of just reciting words to affirm our faith, we’re going to practice giving our worries to God through prayer and thanksgiving. We’re invited to bring up our worries and lay them on the altar- either

side on the cushions. First, I will pray and then during the music, you're invited to bring your written worries and place them on the altar cushions or if you cannot come up or don't want to, you may place them in the offering pouches or you may simply remain seated and lift them up to God. This prayer, written in 1953 by Rev. Howard Thurman, is entitled, "Our Little Lives." Let us pray:

Our little lives, our big problems- these we place upon Thy altar!

The quietness in Thy Temple of Silence again and again rebuffs us:

For some there is no discipline to hold them steady in the waiting

And the minds reject the noiseless invasion of Thy Spirit. For some there is no will to offer what is central in the thoughts- The confusion is so manifest, there is no starting place to take hold. For some the evils of the world tear down all concentrations and scatter the focus of the high resolves. War and the threat of war has covered us with heavy shadows, Making the days big with forebodings- the nights crowded with frenzied dreams and restless churnings. We do not know how to do what we know to do. We do not know how to be what we know to be.

Our little lives, our big problems- these we place upon Thy altar!

*Brood over our spirits, Our Father, Blow upon whatever dream Thou hast for us that there may glow once again upon our hearths the light from Thy altar. Pour out upon us whatever our spirits need of shock, of lift, of release. That we may find strength for these days—Courage and hope for tomorrow. In confidence we rest in Thy sustaining grace, which makes possible triumph in defeat, gain in loss, and love in hate. We rejoice this day to say: ***Our little lives, our big problems- these we place upon Thy altar*** (Meditations of the Heart, pp. 83-84)! Amen.*