

**Peace...Piece by Piece**  
**Philippians 4: 4-9 and Matthew 22: 1-14**  
**October 11, 2020**  
**Eastminster Presbyterian Church**

During my time in seminary, there were anxieties about academics and most certainly finances. If I did not make the grade, the scholarship money dried up. There were work obligations, church commitments, family responsibilities with a very ill father. If a research paper was not due for academic purposes, more often than not, some form needed to be answered or a faith statement written, or psychological evaluation completed for the ecclesiastical side of the ordination process. You get the picture.

Overwhelmed as many of you are with everyday routine of work and living, and perhaps even more overwhelmed in these times of our lives. It was not uncommon to find me cross-legged in the middle of my bed, tears streaming, stomach in knots, emotions ranging from despair to yes, even anger, crying out to God, asking why life seemed more stressful since answering the call to ordained ministry.

But I soon discovered that all that fearfulness and fretting, all of that complaining and crying, angry and anxiety got me nothing but puffy eyes, a terrible headache, and a sick tummy. I began to turn those times of worry into incredible opportunities to have conversations with the One who knew and knows me better than I know myself. I realized that if there was ever a place to express my deepest, truest emotions, it was “on my knees” or in my case, crisscrossed knees. But, here is the life-changer for me; it was at that point that I embraced the truth that, no matter I was asking of God, the most faithful asking was that God’s will be done. But I also discovered the comfort in being able to pray, “Your will, God, but in the midst of reality, might I have some small pieces of peace?”

While the struggles I was experiencing did not magically disappear, I would come to this realization that I was not obsessing, not fretting, not worrying. Whatever issue or issues addressed in my praying could still be there, but there a peace that I could not achieve on my own. The peace of Christ were no longer words to be uttered; my heart was changed!

And that is exactly the kind of wisdom Paul is sharing, “Stop worrying!” That may be easier said than done, at least when we try to go it alone. How many times have you heard: You are a Christian. Stop fretting. Where is your faith? It is as if we are supposed to have these superhuman Christian powers to achieve this anxiety-free life Paul is talking about.

But Paul’s wisdom is not in telling us humans to stop worrying. He tells us that when we do fret, or feel fearful or hang up on hope, we can embrace the truth that we know from whom our help comes. The peace Paul says is ours is a gift from God; it is not a human achievement. It is a peace that comes to us when we ask Christ to intercede for us. When it does, grab on to it, hold it and say thank you!

From Jesus’ own mouth, we remember his concern that the disciples, and us, not worry about stuff, such as what we will wear or eat. But given Paul’s circumstances, he was talking about an

even deeper kind of worry. He was knee-deep in the kind of anxiety that came from living in a world that was hostile to Christians. The citizens of Philippi were living under the rule of the Roman Empire, and empire peace had nothing to do with prayer or Jesus. Christians were watched because they were believed to be a threat to the political world.

Paul was reminding the Philippians that freedom from anxiety came through acknowledging their dependence on God, and that dependence was lived out in prayer and gratitude. It is a peace that we cannot manufacture, but Paul says we certainly have access to it through the intentional practice of prayer.

I would love to tell you that I am worry free because of an intentional prayer life, but I would not be telling the truth. I do have a pray-filled life, but I still let the worry wart in me surface more than I would like. The human side of me still wants to try to solve or resolve problems or issues myself, despite knowing that crisscrossed knees lead me to the very piece of peace I need at that moment. If I could ask for one prayer for myself and for all of us this day, it would be we would had to go to those crisscrossed knees fewer and fewer times because we practice the wisdom that Paul is teaching us. Be intentional in prayer. Be grateful for the opportunity to speak honestly with God to whom we can bare our very souls. And I pray we would grab those pieces of peace when they come our way and say thank you!

I fear that in our day and time, too many people think of the Christian life or even the institution of church as either a place where you must follow a regiment of dos and do nots or that being connected with the Christian faith is a guarantee that life will be smooth sailing.

Neither is true. And that kind of thinking robs us of the full joy that Paul is talking about. The Christian life is not about being shackled to a set of rules and it is not about an anxious-free existence.

As one commentator put it, faith is meant to lead to more than good behavior and a place in heaven later. It is meant to lead to joyous living - to abundant life- to a life, that while not free from troubles, is rich and deep and full of peace, that peace which Paul calls "the peace which passes understanding". And that kind of peace leads to joy. Think about the joyous celebration experienced at the wedding of brides and grooms.

If Matthew is comparing the kingdom of God to a wedding banquet, then what is it, in our faith life that has caused us to miss or minimize the "joy" of living a Christ-like life? In this parable of the wedding banquet, the king opens his home to everyone, good and bad, that the servants can find after the invited guests refuse to attend. Those accepting meet the King's son. Sit at the King's table. The King notices one guest does not have on the appropriate wedding attire and questions how he made it past the guard. With no explanation, the man is thrown out of the party.

We know that Matthew is not talking about the right clothing; he is talking about right living, and Paul reminds us that right living is more than following a set of human-made rules; it is about modeling our life after the life of Christ and in that living finding joy.

What do those clothes look like? Rejoicing because the Lord is near. Being thankful that we can turn our worries and anxieties over to God in prayer. Setting our mind of the things of Christ. Grabbing and enjoying those pieces of peace that come from trusting in God's help.

All this guest needed was to accept what was already waiting for him, that robe, that symbol that showed he was prepared to enjoy himself and to help the hosts rejoice. Perhaps that is what Paul and Matthew are trying to say to us. As good stewards of God, we have been entrusted to not just take care of the blessings of life, we have been asked to enjoy those blessings and enjoy them so much that we throw open wide the doors and invite others to experience and come to know what it means to live a Christ-like life. Living the life of Christ is joy-filled. Pray-filled. Thank-filled. We have been invited to richly enjoy life, both in this world and the next.

Speaking of rich, I close with a legend about a fisherman named Aaron who lived on the banks of a river. Walking home one day, he was dreaming of what he would do if he were rich and in that dreamy state, his foot hit a pouch filled with what he thought were small stones. He picked up the bag and started throwing the pebbles in the water. When I am rich, I will have a large house, and threw a pebble. My wife and I will have servants and rich food, tossed another. Suddenly, the sun's ray caused the stone to sparkle, and Aaron realized that he was throwing away real riches for dreams of being rich.

Money can make us rich, yes. But Paul says, even richer is a relationship with God. Richness is living a joyful life, giving thanks, and resting in peace. We have what we need to enjoy life. So even when we come face to face with some of the uglier realities of life, my prayer is that we will all remember to turn to God, to ask for help and to receive, piece by piece the peace of Christ that it here for the asking. And then do as Paul says...Rejoice!