

King of Glory Lutheran Church
October 10/11, 2020
Year A: 19th Weekend after Pentecost: Philippians 4:1-9
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Philippians 4:1-9

4¹ 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.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 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.

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

8 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. 9 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.

I've been thinking about the power of a letter this week.

Now before you laugh and tell me that letters are a thing of the past please stop for just a moment. Think about a letter that made a difference in your life. Maybe it was one line written on a postcard, or a long letter from a loved one, maybe it was a letter from a school or a doctor, maybe it was a text you got on your phone or a post you read on Facebook.

Letters come in many different forms. And today, I'm interested in the letters that give us an important message when we need it the most.

So why am I thinking about letters? Well I've been reflecting on Paul's letter to the Philippians this week. It has an important message for us today.

If you want to learn more about Paul you can find his story in the book of Acts right after the gospels in the New Testament. Paul is the guy who persecuted the first Christians until he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. After that his name changes from Saul to Paul and instead of persecuting Christians he travels all over the world sharing the good news of Jesus. Paul starts churches that continue to grow even after he moves on.

And because of all his traveling Paul wrote many letters. A few of them survived over time and were passed down and eventually became a part of the New Testament. These letters that were meant for a specific community at one time and are now gifts to us in our time.

Today we hear a few words that Paul writes to the church he started in Philippi. Words of instruction and encouragement.

He says things like “Rejoice in the Lord always” and “Do not worry about anything.” And you might think for a moment that this man Paul was a happy guy with no problems. You might think that until you find out that he wrote this letter to the Philippians from prison. We aren’t sure exactly where he was. He might have been in Ephesus or Caesarea or Rome. But no matter where he was when he wrote this letter Paul is alone, separated from the people he loves and wants to be with. He is waiting because he doesn’t know what is going to happen next.

And just as Paul is missing and longing to be with the church in Philippi, the church is missing Paul. The community is struggling. They would like to see Paul again and share their problems with him. They too are waiting and wondering what the future holds.

So knowing all that, we find that we just might have a few things in common with people who are separated and worried and struggling. During this pandemic that we are living through, many of us are experiencing separation and worries in ways we never have before. We too need words of instruction and encouragement in this time and place. And so we open this letter from Paul to the church.

The words we hear today begin with the instruction to stand firm in the Lord. Paul points us to Jesus who is our strength and our guide. In every time and place we look to Jesus when we feel alone, confused or worried.

So what are we to do in times like these?

Well first Paul addresses the importance of working together. He names two women leaders who are not “of the same mind.” He gives us a glimpse into the leadership of this early church where women and men are leading and working together. He is concerned about their work and life together and so he encourages them to work together.

Next he says “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Know joy in the unconditional, abundant love of God. Seek that joy everyday. This is not the same thing as being happy every day or not acknowledging pain and suffering in your life. Of course we know sadness and grief and suffering. But Paul encourages us to remember that our life is centered in God. And so we rejoice in God who created us and walks with us.

Professor Fred Craddock writes that, “Because the day of Christ is near and because the peace of God stands guard, the church can rejoice...they can offer both thanks and petitions in the assurance of God’s care which surrounds them before, during, and after their prayers. Because God’s peace is on duty, they do not have to be anxiously scanning the horizon for new threats. Alert, yes; anxious, no.”

I love this thought that “the peace of God stands guard.” God who is our center and our strength holds our worries and our struggles. We lift up our prayers to God and in those conversations, in our own letters to God, we share our joys and our sorrows.

When we worry, when we are discouraged, when we grow tired of the challenges we face every day Paul asks us to remember that we are not alone. Jesus is with us. We rejoice in his presence, in his love, in his peace. And we share in all these things together as the church, as this community centered in God’s love.

Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi and to us today is written from a place of separation, anxiety and uncertainty. And yet it is a letter filled with joy, love, peace, encouragement and thanks.

And so as we read this letter from Paul I wonder what it says to the church today?

If Paul were writing to King of Glory I know that he would give thanks for this congregation as we work together, rejoice in the Lord, pray and serve.

During this year when we have found ourselves physically separated we have continued to come together as the church centered in Christ as we worship, grow and serve.

We worship in new ways and new formats. And yet through it all we continue to hear the Word of God proclaimed and offer our prayers together.

We continue to grow as God's people as we learn, study, share and ask questions about God at work in our lives and this world. We continue to tell the story of God's love to the youngest among us and the oldest. Our ministry continues in new and varied ways over zoom, phone calls, letters, and outdoor gatherings.

We have found ways to serve one another by encouraging each other through conversations and cards, through visits in parks and driveways. We have shared food with the hungry and resources with those in need.

If Paul wrote us a letter today he would give thanks for this church, for the ways we continue to work together, rejoice together and pray together.

Paul knew best that even when we are separated physically we are joined together by God. And even when we struggle we can work together as God has called us to do. And even when we worry God will hold on to us and give us peace that we cannot understand.

When you feel alone, or hopeless or afraid open a letter from God. The Bible is filled with letters from God that remind us that we are not alone. These letters encourage us when we need it most.

Today we heard encouraging words from Paul. But this week you might hear encouraging words from a friend or a stranger. God sends us letters everyday through the Bible, through one another, through the surprises of the Holy Spirit. Open one of those letters for the first time. Or read your favorite one, that one you know by heart. But for today may these words from Paul encourage you...

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