

**A Benediction**  
**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher**  
**May 9, 2021**  
**Philippians 4:1–9**

I don't know how many times that I have sat down in front of the computer to write my sermon for Sunday morning and have been in an utter panic. I would think, how could I possibly fill these pages so that I would have enough to say. And if I succeeded in filling the pages with words, would they simply be just that, words? Would I have anything to say that is helpful and cogent or would I be garbled? I live with the nightmare that I will be making no sense and each word I utter lives forever in cyberspace! Not too much pressure!

Today I stand before you one final time, I do not fear that I will have enough to say, but that I will have too much to fit into these final moments!

When the time to say good-bye comes, there are always things that seem to be left unsaid. This is the hardest part of being a pastor who comes at a time of transition. Because by its very nature there is a completion to my work. We have transitioned from one spot to another. It is inevitable that there is a time when I have to say good-bye. And you would think that after being in 19 churches, I would get this down but no matter how many times I do it, I still have this feeling that there is more work that we can do together. Not only what is left undone but also as I leave, how can I adequately convey my deep sense of gratitude or truly thank each of you for your love and care your graciousness and your faithfulness?

On my last Sunday, this is where I turn to Paul's letter to the Philippians. I have preached on this passage at least 14 times more than any other

Bible passage! I have an affinity with Paul. Early in my ministry as an interim, I met two very proper elderly women from the first church I served as an Associate Pastor. They said to me, “You know you are a lot like the Apostle Paul.” I was quite taken aback. “Really?” I said, and they answered, “Yes, you go into a church you tell them to shape up and then you leave!” I kind of like that. Through Paul’s letters, it is clear he cares deeply for his churches. Today, I am adding the first verses of the Philippian passage. Because I may not be telling Oak Grove to shape up before I leave, I see these first verse of Paul tying up loose ends before he signs off. And I found myself doing the same here. He writes to urge Eurodia and Syntyche... in the past week you have been very patient with me saying, “Yes, we will make sure the bells get looked at... yes, we will not forget to tell Loaves & Fishes when the blood drive happen.” Another reason Paul and I are alike, we like to micro-manage!

Listen for God’s worship in Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi: (Philippians 4) <sup>1</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.

### THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Today is my last chance... I can't say that I will do better next time. This is it. That is when the panic wells up inside of me. I know I really don't know what to say until...

Until I take a deep breath- go for a walk, and play a few hands of solitaire. And it is then that I realize what it truly means to preach the gospel message. It is a message of letting go. It is not my individual task to stand here and deliver the final word to you. It is not my responsibility alone to give you what you need for the coming week. I am a small part of what happens within these walls and outside of them. It is in my human pride and arrogance to presume to take full responsibility and overlook God's role in the process and the role of each of us in this community. We sing, we preach God's message and we live out God's love. All that happens here that inspires and motivates and informs is in the context of the full act being the church in and beyond these walls.

I am humbled because of the many voices from Dan to Bill, to Mary, to Denise, to Beth, to Jermaine, to Jake, to Andres and now you will look forward to Bart. And all those behind and before me and the voices present in actions and conversations that have been a conduit of God's

grace and love as well as the empowerment of the Holy Spirit that can turn our modest attempts into life changing moments.

Now I can approach this sermon in a new light when I realize that this is not the final word that I am delivering to you this day, but it is a benediction. Yes, a benediction, that part of the worship service that propels us into another week. Benediction comes from the Latin, *Benedictus* which means, “good word.” Who is he master of benedictions but Paul? Paul’s love for the churches with whom he corresponds is so evident. He cares not only what is happening to them as he writes to them but also after he leaves them. And the churches have reciprocated with prayers and love toward Paul. Paul’s letters are not just flowery words that make the churches feel good. His letters contain admonishments and challenge. At times Paul words are almost too direct. But he also is free not only with his criticism, but with encouragement and joy for the accomplishments that the group of believers have done. Paul writes plainly to the churches when he feels they are losing sight of their reason for existence. And when they become caught up in internal bickering, he reminds them of their higher purpose and calling. The gospel message is always foremost as Paul addresses both the important and the mundane.

Paul also readily admits that his words are not from his mouth alone but that he is the messenger of the Gospel message. When churches start gathering around him or another leader and become loyal only to Paul or Apollos or whoever, he redirects them to focus on Christ as with whom to place their loyalty.

As I stand before you to give you that good word, the benediction, I am aware of why the benediction is held until the end of the service and why Paul puts the benediction at the end of his letters. If we were to jump immediately to the good word it would be difficult to appreciate

the potency of how good that word is! If we were to go directly to the resurrection without traveling through the depth of the cross, the concept of grace would be lost. The only way I can stand before you and presume to deliver the good word to you is that I have traveled with you for a time through times of success and times of discouragement. What a time we have had. Each of us has been challenged, each of us has had our worlds turned upside down not only by the pandemic, but we are being confronted with racial inequity. We can no longer hide from injustice or dismiss it. As a church you are addressing it through study, conversation and through restorative giving. There is more to do. It will not hide any longer and I applaud Oak Grove for addressing the inequity that persists, and it is difficult work.

Our journey has been fun, filled with laughter but also poignant and with tears. Our time together in our church beyond the walls, we have had to say good-bye to long and faith filled members. In our time of being apart, we have mourned that we could not physically hold each other close and had to find other ways to share comfort and care. Our journey has been exasperating when we cannot see each other, hold hands or hug. We have felt a bit like Job as at times we simply wanted to sit on the dung heap and shake our fist at God and say, now what, really? The Good Word comes only after we have traveled together in a genuine way.

The benediction is delivered by Paul when all else has been said. It comes not when all is complete for the churches, they still have many issues facing them, but it comes when there is nothing more to be said. Paul delivers the words with confidence, then he sends his people equipped with the message of God's love. "Rejoice in the lord always. In case you did not get that, again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known by everyone. The Lord is nearby. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and asking with thanksgiving let your

requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ.

Paul gives the words with the confidence that they will ring true to those who hear them even long after Paul is gone, after all the good-byes are said. He has the confidence that the Good Word will not drift away but remain in the hearts and minds of those who hear it.

The benediction sends us forth but it also ties us together. As we say our good-byes, we know that we are still one with Christ. As Gregg and I leave Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, I know that we are still one in the body of Christ. The benediction reminds us that although we may leave this place, we are not alone, but part of the greater community. We are with all those when we come together in Christ's name. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

It is the Good Word that sends us forth and empowers us with God's love. God went to the darkest depths to join us together through Jesus Christ.

This is the time when our journeys take different paths. You will continue to work in ministry and mission and to worship and struggle with what it means to follow this Jesus who we call upon in this time in the place in this culture. You will embrace Bart and Mary as your pastors and guide and together you will be a church and a witness to God's love in this community, this neighborhood and this world. Each week you will be sent forth empowered with God's love and that love will bring you back once again.

Hear the Good Word. "Whatever is true, 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, then think about these things. 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.”

And so Oak Grove, we have been through the plague of the century, we are navigating through a great flood and I now hear this summer is the hatching of the 17-year cicadas in which quadrillions of those creatures will arrive. So now pestilence... hmm... I think I leave that one up to Bart and Mary! Thanks be to God, Amen.