

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**November 21, 2021**

**Philippians 4:4–9**

**Colossians 3:15–17**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Spirit speak to us. Open our hearts and minds to your word, to that future as yet unknown, but in your hands. May we see ways to participate in the coming kingdom. Speak to us, inspire us, and work through us. In Jesus name, Amen.

**Colossians 3:15–17**

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**Philippians 4:4–9**

<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 Message - Philippians**

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in God! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. God could show up any minute! Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious, the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

My mother was a worrier. Like a world class worrier. She was also a remarkable woman whose life's work impacted many people. She was a perinatal grief counselor who helped people in some of the worst moments in their lives. She was an inspiration and helped create training for doctors and nurses nationwide.

There is a story that personifies my mother well that is shared in my family. She was part of planning a national conference and had worked for months and months to put it together. In the final organizational meeting, the planning team met, and someone said, "I think we have it all covered, I don't think we have anything to worry about." My mom's response, without missing a beat, was, "Give me a minute."

Worry, anxiety, struggle, it is so easy to get overwhelmed at times. And the apostle Paul was aware of it and addresses this in the passage from

his letter to the Philippian church. The first part of the section I read contains Paul's instructions about what to do with our worry and our concerns. I like how The Message reframed it in today's language. After reminding them to be joyful and to remember that God is near, Paul says, "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life."

I don't think this is to diminish concerns or troubles. Paul understands there are real concerns, real things to be worried about, after all he is writing this letter from prison. He has had hardships in his life. But he also offers those hardships up to God. I believe Paul is saying here that we should put our worry in the proper place, in the proper context. That is, lift it up to God.

The second part of the passage centers on Paul's admonition to focus on that which is good. I love this language in the final two verses from the reading today. Paul says, "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." Or as stated in The Message, "Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious, the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."

What we have been going through is unprecedented for us. We are tired, scared, overwhelmed, lonely. This isn't normal. For the last year and a half, we have to think through the potential implications of many of our totally normal, everyday actions and decisions in a way we never had to

before, because of how they could affect others. This is called “[moral fatigue](#),” and it’s exhausting.

Of course, the moral fatigue is taxing in itself, but we also have to keep in mind that making any type of difficult or ethically complex decision is stressful, even under the best circumstances. In other words, it’s not only the frequency at which we’re now making tough choices, the decision-making process itself can be mentally and emotionally exhausting when there is not a clear choice.

On top of that, many of us were already at capacity. And there is a seemingly unrelenting barrage of bad news, injustice, and inequity. Many are dumfounded and in shock from the news this previous week on a verdict that does not reflect justice, where a child became a vigilante, where the idols and sins of white supremacy, violence, and guns came into full view. Where we cannot imagine this kind of outcome if the shooter were a young black man. Where innocent black children have been killed without a gun in their hand. It points to our brokenness, and disconnectedness. And we are left to utter words, “Lord, in your mercy,” and “How long O Lord,” once again.

All of this anxiety, all of this worry, can feel crippling. And when we are also removed from one another physically, well we have more opportunity to dwell in that anxiety. Brian McCallum, a licensed clinical professional counselor, has said “Not only do we need to consider the COVID-19 pandemic, we also have to consider that there is, in effect, an emotional pandemic of anxiety, worry and fear,” McCallum said. “Anxiety, worry and fear thrive in environments of ambiguity and uncertainty. In short, emotions are contagious, as well and, “Anxiety has a way of making everything feel urgent.”

In Colossians, we are instructed, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” In a world where there are

so many other things that pull our focus – a reminder to reorient our lives, in praise, toward God is a powerful thing. A reminder to reorient to the Lord whose character is marked by “steadfast love”, “graciousness,” and “faithfulness” is something that is essential.

There have been many studies that show the benefits of expressing gratitude and thankfulness. Expressing gratitude and thanks has real impacts on physical and emotional health. It has been shown to enhance empathy and reduces aggression. It builds self-esteem and increases our mental fortitude.

Research tells us that the more you express thanks, the happier you become. When we take the time to remember the positive, when we think on the good, the honorable, and true; it has an effect on us. And Paul tells us that we can choose to live in this way. By practicing the habit of thinking on the best, on the good, it will influence and shape our lives. It won't mean that we will win the lottery, or that we will achieve fame and fortune, this is not the prosperity gospel, but it does mean that it will help orient us, it focuses us on the things that matter, and perhaps even prepares us for those times when things don't go our way or when bad things happen. It's cyclical, in that it will remind us to take things to God in prayer when the best doesn't occur.

Reorienting our lives toward praise is not about seeing the world in a Pollyannaish way, or to put on rose-colored glasses and refusing to see pain and anguish in the world. It is not about seeing the broken aspects of the world, but it is about helping us from letting the broken and painful parts of the world from overtaking us. It is about gathering the energy and the fortitude to be able to live and move and have our being in a broken and painful world to make it less broken and painful.

As one friend and preacher says, “Making a joyful noise to the Lord, when the world around us seems hellbent on destruction and pain, is a

counter cultural act of defiance. When we can find joy and praise in the face of death, loss, and human-caused pain, we turn, we re-orient the world toward God. We claim that death will not win. We sing hope to a world hearing despair.”<sup>i</sup>

Gratitude and praise is an act of resistance.

As my grandfather was fond of saying, “Hallelujah, Anyway”

As people of faith, we are called to be oriented toward praise, hope, and thanksgiving. Toward nothing less than grace. So, we make a joyful noise, even when we know things are not as they should be, in hope that our work together will give us the strength and will to continue to work toward God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness.

We do not praise God for God’s personal sake, but for the sake of God’s mission and to proclaim God’s love and glory. John Calvin, the ancestor of the Presbyterian faith, has said, “the whole world is a theatre for the display of the divine goodness, wisdom, justice, and power, but the church is the orchestra, as it were, the most conspicuous part of it; and the nearer the approaches are that God makes to us, the more intimate and condescending the communication of [God’s] benefits, the more attentively are we called to consider them.”

In other words, all of creation is a stage in which to demonstrate God’s goodness, love, justice, and wisdom. And it is our work, together to praise God to proclaim these good gifts from the creator. In doing this, we give ourselves to God fully; it is a way to be in relationship with God. In doing this, we also praise God to and with others and so we give God away to our neighbor as well. Praise is witness to who God is and what God has done.

There is a saying that goes, “Joy is not the absence of suffering. It is the presence of God.” So, we reorient ourselves to God and to grace.

Joy, prayer, thanksgiving, peace--these identify spirituality for Paul. Forbearance, gentleness, and little anxiety are marks of the spiritual life, says Paul. But it takes practice, and it takes reminding that God is near, and it takes prayer. God's vision for us is shalom, wholeness in every sense of the word. But it isn't just given to us, we work to help shape our lives into shalom.

The French poet Paul Valery observed, "We hope vaguely but dread precisely." We can allow our worries, our concerns, our fears take up a lot of space in our heads. When we only focus on uncertainties and worries of tomorrow, we rob ourselves of peace in the present.

God is infinitely greater than this moment.

I want us to hope precisely as much as possible, so I have some suggestions about how to do this, and it will take practice. It requires making specific choices.

One of the easiest ways to begin calming an anxious mind is to practice breath regulation, which helps bring balance to the body's nervous system during times of heightened stress, he said.

The other concrete tip is simply just to remember to move, whether that is walking outside or walking on a treadmill or stretching or following along with a video instruction on Pilates or yoga,"

Consider taking the words of our text today and putting them somewhere in a prominent place so that you can see them as a reminder to yourself. As a reminder to offer everything to God in prayer, particularly when you have troubles and worries. As a reminder that when you begin to focus on things that are not so good, that you can choose to focus on things that are better.

Another thing you can do is rewrite the passage from today in your own words. Or, perhaps memorize this passage, or a part of the passage, and think on it as your own personal mission statement.

You can create an inbox for God in your home. Find a small box where you can write down your concerns and worries and place them in God's hands. Let God work on them for a while.

Finally, keep a gratitude journal. Either on your Facebook page to share with others, or maybe on your own in private. But write maybe three things a day for which you are grateful. You could even do this with a gratitude partner, someone to share gratitude with and to keep you accountable to the task of remembering to rejoice and be thankful. Find someone to exchange daily emails with and share with one another the three things for which you are grateful.

<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.

Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://marciglass.com/2017/06/10/programmed-to-praise/>