**19th Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 11, 2020**

**St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa, Virginia**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri**

**Year A**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

***“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” Psalm 19:14***

2020 thus far has been a memorable one. I remember - I began 2020 with such hope. I just knew it was going to be my year. I knew, God willing, that I would be ordained to the priesthood. It was a year that contained hope and what I viewed as a coming to fruition for me from years of ministry. Moving more fully into my calling and embracing the fullness of life that Christ has for me. I did not know when the year began that I would move into parish ministry, leave the chaplaincy which I loved, and become your priest here at St. James. I did not know all that 2020 would hold. None of us did.

I think it is safe to say that not many of us who have lived through 2020 will ever forget it. It has been a year marked for us like no other - I feel confident none of us have fully been able to process it - as it continues to unfold and we have spent our energies trying to just get through and make sense of each day. Each day truly is a new day and brings new things. Not to get stuck on it, but let me recap some of the year for you thus far:

**January 2020**

11 – China reports first death related to Coronavirus.

20 – The United States, among other countries, reports first case of COVID-19.

26 – Kobe and Gianna Bryant and others, are killed in a helicopter crash in Southern California.

30 – The World Health Organization declares a global health emergency.

**February**

5 – President Trump is acquitted on articles of Abuse of Power and Obstruction of Congress.

8 – The first American death related to Coronavirus occurs in Seattle, Washington.

**March**

6 – The worldwide number of COVID-19 cases surpasses 100,000.

12 – Actor Tom Hanks and his wife, actress Rita Wilson, confirm that they have tested positive for Coronavirus.

13 – All West Virginia schools close “indefinitely.”

17 – West Virginia, the last U.S. state to have a COVID-19 patient, confirms first case in Shepherdtown.

24 – It is estimated that 20-25 percent of the global population is self-quarantining.

**April**

20 – The United Kingdom and the United States begin to use the donated blood plasma from coronavirus survivors to treat active cases of the virus.

27 – Rumors of Kim Jong Un’s death begin to circulate, but are eventually proven false.

29 – Trials of COVID-19 vaccine begin.

**May**

25 – George Floyd is killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, bringing light to many similar cases, and leading to Black Lives Matter protests, riots and movements.

**June**

Wildfires abound - Australia has an estimated 18.6 million hectares (one hectare is equal to 2.47 acres) burned -over 5,900 buildings destroyed, and the fires killed at least 34 people. (Not including those who may have died from intense smoke pollution)

**July**

8 – Actress Naya Rivera’s son is rescued from their abandoned boat on Lake Piru. Naya is presumed dead.

13 – Naya Rivera’s body is recovered from Lake Piru. Many COVID-19 outbreaks occur throughout this month as a result of gatherings.

**August**

6 – President Trump signs executive orders to ban TikTok, a popular social media platform, due to possible safety risks. (my daughter Abbey has heart failure in anticipation of this loss)

20 – The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) confirms first cases of Multi-system Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C) in West Virginia.

**September**

Schools try to decide whether to open or not open - President Trump contracts Covid-19.

[[1]](#footnote-2)

I bring it up all these things because in the Epistle reading today, Paul encourages the Philippians to:

“Always be joyful, then, in the Lord; I repeat be joyful.” Or as stated in our translation for today, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Did I lose any of you here? Did anybody just flop over? Or just tune me out? I wouldn’t blame you if you did - I can hear you saying, “But Mother Jennifer, what is there to be joyful in or about?”

Well, here is where the sermon really begins.

What is there to be joyful or rejoice about? “Joy” and I have always struggled.

Which is one of the reasons why I chose to spend a few weeks in Philippians with you. Life is hard and difficult things happen. This year has been hard - so many things that we have depended on for stability, and where we found our “joy” at times has been taken from us. We have been tried and pushed.

So what then is there in to rejoice?

Here is the answer:

Real and lasting joy comes from the confidence that, no matter what happens, we are inseparably connected to God.

Joy has to do with where the focus of one’s life is or, to employ a famous phrase by Paul Tillich, with one’s “ultimate concern.”

The Apostle Paul could rejoice because he did not fear death. A few years before penning his letter to the Philippians, he wrote to the congregations in Rome:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:35).

The knowledge that Christ has overcome death gave Paul this certainty. This is what Tillich had in mind when explaining: “Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being.[[2]](#footnote-3)

To focus on Christ, and not the events around us, has immediate ramifications for the here and now.

“Joy and peace” though separate clauses and phrases in our text, are thematically inter-related here. The substance of joy and peace is not found so much in the emotions they evoke, as in the attitudes, behaviors, and relationships in which they are grounded.

In verse 4, Paul urges the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always.” The use of the present imperative signals that “rejoicing” is a habitual attitude that informs behavior. The critical phrase, however, is “in the Lord.”

There are many things that can be a cause of rejoicing: good news; an unexpected reprieve; achievement of a hard-won goal. In some cases, the “joy” will be fleeting; where the **cause** of rejoicing has an enduring impact, the “joy” will continue. To “rejoice in the Lord always” points to a “joy” that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges.

This requires something more than seasonal cheerfulness. This is very good news for me, because I am pretty sure if you asked any of my friends or my children to describe me, “joyful” would not necessarily be in their list of descriptive adjectives.

It is a “joy” rooted in an ongoing relationship, built on trust, that is able to negotiate the moments of joylessness in ways that ultimately work for good.

Bad things happen. So what is critical in these times is relationship: our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but also our relationship in community.

Previously Paul had asked his audience to strive “side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27). We may assume that such advice was necessary because different opinions prevailed among his audience. In 4:2, we now read (according to NRSV): “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.”

It may be inferred that there may have been tensions in the Philippian congregation.

What the book of Philippians is about largely is how Paul would like the church in Philippi to be in community with one another.

This does not mean that everyone always agrees or gets along. Rather, it reminds us that each of us has a role to play in creating the supportive relationships that are the foundation of “joy” and a cause for “rejoicing.”

Let me repeat, “relationships are the foundation of joy and the cause for rejoicing.”

In 4:5, Paul continues the theme of relationship with the command, “let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Here he employs what is called an aorist imperative, which emphasizes a specific, rather than general, kind of conduct.[[3]](#footnote-4)

In English, “gentleness” is often associated with being “meek and mild.” In Greek, *epieikes,* is associated with tolerance, “not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom.”[[4]](#footnote-5) To embody e*pieikes* means to recognize that we have a choice in how we behave towards others. It is not just about being nice or kind; it is about the exercise of power.

I am going to repeat this: ***to act in gentleness means we have a choice in how we behave toward others.*** It is not about tone or connotation or outward manifestation of a meek temperament.The term gentleness refers to how you choose to exercise your power toward others.

Let me try to interpret this for us: our interactions with others - with everyone - should be characterized by a spirit of gentleness - which means maybe not always insisting we are right (even if we know we are) on certain issues. It is not compromising your views but rather refers to when and if you choose to express your stance and interact/ communicate with others.

Paul contextualizes this command by following it with “the Lord is near.” Why should you do this? Because the Lord is near.

Elsewhere, Paul uses the word *epieikes* (“gentleness”) to describe Christ (2 Corinthians 10:1). It is paired with *prautes,* which is translated “meekness” but is better defined as “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

To choose *not* to exercise power, (gentleness) or to exercise it differently, requires self-awareness and humility. This is the power of Christ. It is in this way that Paul says we are to engage *everyone.[[6]](#footnote-7)*

We are sometimes tempted to insist on exercising every right of law or custom because of fear or anxiety. “I have a right to do this”, we have all heard this. Just because I may have a right to do something, does not mean that it is prudent to do so. And I can choose to not exercise my right.

In Philippians 4:6, Paul counters these fears and anxieties with the command, “do not worry about anything.”

Paul is not saying that there is nothing to worry about or that the things we worry about are unimportant. Rather he places our anxieties, fears, and concerns in the context of our relationship to God.

Paul expected that Christ’s return was imminent, and this would have consequences on how people who believed in him would behave. For instance, they would “not worry about anything” (verse 6a), referencing what Jesus had said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear” (Matthew 6:25). Instead, trust in God leads to prayer (v. 6b).

A Christological focus in our lives can help us in times of great uncertainty. It helps us to shift our focus and tells us how to do it - in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

When concerns start to dominate our agendas, the best remedy as put forth in this passage may be to put our focus on God.

It alone guarantees “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (4:7) -- and hence empowers us to overcome human difference.

The peace that Paul speaks of is a gift because it is produced by God.

It is not an act of divine intervention that suddenly makes all things right.

It is a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Too guard is to protect. There is no shortage of evidence that our hearts and minds, two powerful forces that drive our imaginations and shape our attitudes and behaviors, need protecting -- not only from the influence of outside forces, but sometimes from ourselves. God’s peace protects us by drawing us deeper into relationship with Christ, the source also of our joy.

I don’t know that there are any easy answers to dealing with the anxiety that is all around us. But I do know that Paul has outlined in the book of Philippians some specific ways he wished for the Church at Philippi to deal with their anxiousness and all the things that were happening around them.

He encouraged them to act in a manner worthy of the Gospel. He encouraged them to unity and he told them to persevere. And today he ends his letter to the Philippians encouraging them to guard their hearts, let your gentleness be known, to keep your mind focussed on whatever is true and honorable.

And in the doing of these things, the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds.

Amen.

1. <https://www.wvgazettemail.com/flipside/flipside_news/a-look-at-2020-so-far-flipside/article_c4f3f739-07c5-5b4c-8721-f1bab36f67ae.html> - adapted by Jennifer L. Lazzuri [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us” (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967, p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 719-720. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Wallace, 720-721. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. W.F. Bauer, W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3907> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)