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“Courage Doesn’t Always Roar”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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Psalm 51:10-17; Isaiah 30:1-15; Philippians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul summarizes an agenda for Christian living in four brief verses.

Rejoice. Demonstrate gentleness. Turn your concerns into prayers and gratitude. Don’t worry and trust God.

Paul’s instruction is straightforward and uncomplicated. It seems so simple that one could easily dismiss it as “religious happy talk” lacking reality, substance, and depth.

Rejoice always. Be gentle to all. Quit worrying. God’s peace will guard you. Someone might respond, “Those are wonderful ideals but they don’t hold up in a world of militant religious and political extremism, of national and international epidemics, of rampant personal and domestic violence.

Such religious instruction from the Apostle Paul does appear out of touch with reality, doesn’t it? And that is because it is in touch with a different reality. The reality it reflects is one where God is present and active. And that changes everything.

You see, Paul is not out of touch with reality. He is keenly aware of the challenges of life. He is writing this letter to the Philippians from a prison cell, not from a beach resort on the Mediterranean. Troublemakers are harassing the Philippian

church. In the verses just prior to our reading today, Paul has to sort out a conflict between two of his colleagues in the church.

Paul is not out of touch. He knows what it is like to struggle to get ahead, to be the best, to reach the top. In his previous way of living, he did not mind hurting others to reach the pinnacle of his career.

But now he has a different perspective. Paul's attainments of noble birth and successful effort from his previous life he now considers as trash to be rolled out to the curb.

So the words Paul writes are not uninformed. He knows the very real circumstances of life in this world. Paul understands another reality, a new reality, which gives shape and meaning to it all. Paul allows this new reality to reframe what he experiences in the world, and that is what he encourages the church at Philippi to do.

To reframe a situation is to look at it another way, through a different lens, in order to understand it in a new way.

Listen to the language Paul uses to reframe life's situations:

- "Rejoice *in the Lord* always."
- "Let your gentleness be known to all, *for the Lord is near.*"
- "Don't be anxious but pray and be thankful, *for God's peace* stands as a protecting guard over your hearts and minds."

Paul's language reflects the new reality. It offers a different way for the faith community to perceive what is taking place. God is present among us; Jesus Christ is alive and active and working his way in this world; the Spirit comforts and protects and renews.

Do you and I believe that? If that is what we believe, if that is a reality we perceive as true, how does that change our perspective and shift our behavior?

A man was sitting in the waiting room of a cancer clinic. He was thumbing through the magazines on the table. The title of an article caught his eye: it read “No Bad Days.” It was written by a cancer patient who had been fighting that dread disease for years. In the article the cancer patient reflected, “I may have hot days and cold days. I have dry mouth days and swollen tongue days. I have lonely days and wish I could be lonely days. I have hair falling out days and chapped lip days. I have tired days and aching days. I have diarrhea days and regurgitation days, but I don’t have any bad days.”

One theologian recalled his mother telling him, “Always thank God for what’s left. There is always something left. If you have enough breath to complain, you have enough breath to praise God.”

That does not mean sorrow or trouble will never accompany us. The spirituals can say, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” and still conclude, “Nobody knows but Jesus. Glory, Hallelujah!”

I think some folks struggling with illness and racial inequity were letting Philippians 4 reframe their reality. They may be discovering a reality that might be known as “quiet courage.”

Mary Anne Radmacher has written a little book titled *Courage Doesn’t Always Roar*. The book starts this way: “Courage Doesn’t Always Roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, ‘I will try again tomorrow.’”

She dedicates the book to adoptive parents, to service industry workers, to teachers and health professionals, to all who know the difference between expecting success and working in a construct where to “try again” requires the deepest courage of all. Her point is about quiet courage.

Mostly we are aware of courage in its loud form. One author distinguishes loud courage from quiet courage. “Loud courage is being the dissenter in the room,

speaking truth to power, leading troops into battle... It is fighting for change.”
(*Two Types of Courage* by Frank Haney)

The more subtle form of courage doesn't receive the press or accolades of the louder type, but it is just as important. “Quiet courage is taking that next step toward a goal even when the conditions are not ideal... It is executing even when life throws you a curveball, you have had a hectic day, someone else lets you down. If loud courage is about taking on ‘City Hall’... then quiet courage is taking on yourself. If loud courage is what you do when everyone is watching, quiet courage is what you do when no one else is watching.” (*Two Types of Courage* by Frank Haney)

Can we learn that courage and gentleness, together, are possible? Can the reality of the presence of Jesus Christ sustain what Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, calls *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*?

For us, *Philippians 4* can reframe life in ways that puts together courage and forbearance and hope.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

So how do we get such a virtue?

I think most of us play to an audience. Who is it we are trying to please? Parents, children, a love interest? Our boss, societal values, some standard we've set for ourselves?

When the Lord becomes the audience we play to, might that change how we act and respond to the circumstances of life and the people we encounter? After all, God in Christ has revealed his acceptance of us and love for us and actions in our best interests. So why should we be so fearful, why would we question if we are good enough since our performance is not a determining factor?

Sometimes we lose hope, sometimes we forget that what we do can make a difference. Our power and influence seem so small and unproductive.

It was that way in the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.” He knew the moments of loud courage, but he knew how critical to change was the virtue of quiet courage.

It was that way in bringing justice to couples seeking the rights and protections and joys of marriage. It will be that way as the world struggles with the Ebola crisis, with domestic violence, and child abuse. One small step at a time, one person at a time, one little victory at a time.

Perhaps we can let Philippians 4 reframe our reality.

“Do not worry because through your prayers offered in a spirit of thankfulness, God attends your requests. And God’s peace, which transcends our ability to understand, will stand as a guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Fred Craddock, one of my favorite preachers and teachers, tells a story about a time he was waiting for a flight in an airport. He was sitting in one of those comfortable airport chairs, minding his own business, when a group of young men, fresh from some Christian retreat or conference, sat down near him.

They were full of themselves, talking about God with inappropriately loud voices and engaging others who were not a part of their circle in the conversation. An older man also was sitting near Fred. This group of young men began asking the old fellow to say some good word about God. The man looked befuddled. He wasn’t part of their group. They pressed him. “Hasn’t God ever done anything significant in your life?”

The old man paused, and then began to speak. “Before I shipped out overseas in World War II, I wanted to attend a concert of a world famous contralto who was singing in town. I went to the theatre but the tickets were sold out.

“They let me in because I was in my uniform, and I stood during the concert on the side of the stage just inside the curtain.

“She sang, and she received several ovations. Finally she said, ‘One last song, what do you want me to sing?’ And someone in the crowd yelled out, ‘O Danny Boy.’ The singer had two sons, one who served in the German army and another among the Allied forces. It nearly drove her crazy with fear that one son might kill the other. ‘O Danny Boy’ is a song about war and death. And the woman sang it with all her heart. And when she finished, she left the stage and fell into my arms and cried like a baby. After several minutes, she managed to wipe her tears and face, and she said to me, ‘Thank you, God bless you.’ What happened that night had an impact on how I interacted with my wife and daughters.”

By this time those young men were real quiet. Fred leaned into the conversation, and asked him, “To what do you attribute your presence on that stage that night?”

The man said with a question, “Luck?” And Fred said, “Do you think it was luck?” And he said, “No.”

Quiet courage on the part of one person leads to the quiet courage of others. You see, courage doesn’t always roar.

It is the power of reframing based on the reality of God’s work in Christ. Philippians 4 can help us to take whatever comes and to use it in the building of a life of courage and compassion and love.

It is a simple and profound message to embrace.

“Rejoice always. Be gentle in your dealings with all. Don’t worry about anything. God is present, God’s love is constant, and God’s peace will guard you now and always.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.