A PRESCRIPTION FOR PEACE

Living a Life of Abundant Peace
Text: Philippians 4:1-9

A Common Longing

Of all the letters that Paul wrote, none is as uniformly upbeat in its affirmations and tender in its tone than the one which he wrote to the church at Philippi. In the final chapter of this glowing epistle, however, the Apostle registers a single grave concern for the future of the Philippian church. Hear his words again: "Therefore, my brothers [and sisters], whom I love and long for, my joy and crown… stand firm in the Lord, dear friends... I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel."

What was wrong with Euodia and Syntyche that prompted virtually the only word of anxious concern uttered by Paul in the whole of his letter? We can only guess from the counsel which follows. It seems that these women had lost their sense of peace. Why was that so?

Maybe they had the kind of financial worries that sometimes plague even the most conscientious of stewards. Perhaps they had begun to despair about some broken relationship, or illness, or impending test or loss. Maybe their schedules had become so full that the mere act of keeping track of all the appointments or demands had sent them into a fit of anxiety. Perhaps most of their lives were going along smoothly, yet underneath the polished surface was a restless searching for something they couldn't quite name.

We don't know what it was for sure; but this we do know. Word had come to Paul that something was stirring within the hearts of these women, perhaps creating conflict between them, for which the only answer -- Paul believed -- was the peace of Christ.

Do you ever long for peace too? Do you ever long for a peace that somehow enables you to deal with the stresses of daily life with an equanimity and ease -- to feel a tranquility of the Spirit that can't be disturbed no matter what comes at you from without or what feelings may well up in you from within. Many of us truly want that fruit of the Spirit which the Bible calls the “peace of Christ which transcends understanding.”

Popular Prescriptions

The question, of course, is: How do we attain it? A variety of popular prescriptions come to mind. Go, for example, to the psychology section of any secular bookstore around here and you will find shelves of books telling you that we can find a greater inner peace by knowing each other better. Understand why women love too much or why men run away from women who do; figure out how men are from Mars and women from Venus, and you will have a new peace about your relationships. Learn to help other people pour out their feelings, or learn to tell them how you really feel about them, and you can create a wonderful peace, the experts say.
Then again, if you listen to the insights advanced by any one of dozens of new age seminars or "self-realization" sessions marketed towards you today, you will be told that you won't find peace by knowing others, so much as by knowing yourself better. Explore the God inside of you. Discover the wounded child within. Know thyself, to thine own self be true, and all will be well.

Then there is also the voice of the advertisers of our age whose seductive message is that you can find peace not so much by knowing self or others as by knowing nothing. Don't think, they say, get away from it all. Forget your worries by coming to our resort, by climbing into our hermetically sealed car, by drinking our beer. Lose yourself in our product, and then you'll find peace.

The Scriptural Prescription

The consistent message of the Christian scriptures, however, is that you will not find peace where the world tells you to look for it. Knowing others is important. Knowing yourself can be enlightening. Even relaxing with some product that helps you be comfortable knowing nothing for awhile may be fine in moderation now and then. But the Bible suggests that if these are to be any real help, and not simply empty diversions, then you must commit yourself above all else to finding peace by knowing Jesus. St. Augustine was right when he said: “Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they find their rest in thee.”

That's what Paul was getting at when he urged Euodia and Syntyche to “agree in the Lord” -- or more literally, as other translations have it -- "be of the same mind in the Lord." It was towards offering a truly helpful prescription for peace that Paul wrote elsewhere in this letter: "I consider every other strategy a losing proposition compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord".¹

Why is knowing Jesus so important? Why will almost every Christian preacher or teacher you ever listen to continually advise you to study the story of Jesus in the Scriptures, to come and worship Jesus week-by-week, to pray without ceasing in Jesus' name? For one simple reason; a reason that might become clear by making a confession to you.

I was the worst Little League player in New York State when I was growing up. I mean I lost more games for my team by letting fly balls bounce through my legs, and did more to build the strikeout average of the pitchers in our league than any self-respecting 12 year-old has a right to.

For years I thought it was because I was simply uncoordinated, or lacked self-confidence -- and some of that was true. But when I hit the seventh grade, the social misery I felt, forced me to come to grips with something I'd never wanted to face before. I was about as blind as my bat. I could hardly read the blackboard from my front-row seat, and I'd have to find a way to see. The next month I traded in the tortoise-shell glasses I never wore for a pair of contact lenses I wore every day, and a whole new world opened up for me.

What Paul is trying to tell us through his letter to the Philippians is that the Euodias and the Syntyche's among us don't have peace because we just can't see. Whether you want to call our condition sin or spiritual ignorance or what you may, the eyes through which we look at our
world are hopelessly malformed. It is not until we know Jesus… until we gain the lenses Paul calls "the mind of Christ"… until we begin to look at the world with the particular view that Jesus has… that life will come into focus for us. Here’s a simple definition for you: Peace is that tranquillity of the soul that grows within us when we start to see the world as Jesus sees it -- through the eyes of eternity.

Putting on the Glasses of God: The Lens of Eternal Joy

How do we do that? In this age of anxiety, how would Jesus have us view our world? It seems to me that our text for the morning suggests that we need to put on the glasses of God – or more specifically -- a set of spiritual bifocals. It helps to put on a spiritual perspective that enables us to see the events and people in our lives in a whole new way. And the first of those two lenses Paul invokes with this charge: "Rejoice in the Lord always," he says. And then, just in case his listeners thought they had heard him wrong, he repeats, "I will say it again, rejoice!"

It is not easy to live out that instruction, is it? There are simply too many events that don’t look anything like occasions for rejoicing. When the doctor’s news shatters your hopes… when the job disappears or the relationship collapses… when a loved one is snatched away or someone you counted on walks away… rejoicing seems the most unnatural thing in the world.

That’s why I value the reflection once shared with me by a businessman I know. He said: "I don't think God asks us to rejoice for the things that make us worry or hurt. God doesn't call us to be masochists -- to love pain. I think he calls us to believe with absolute certainty that whatever the circumstances, he is sovereign.” The passage from Philippians doesn’t calls us to rejoice not for our suffering, but in the Lord. We gain peace from the deliberate discipline of rejoicing that there is a Lord who will somehow work a good purpose for us in the end.

Jesus once stood before a very worried band of disciples and said precisely that. It seemed to them that all their hopes might be dashed if Jesus was about to die as he seemed to believe he was. They saw things only in the light of today. But Jesus saw things in the light of eternity. "Let not your hearts be troubled," said Jesus. "Neither let them be afraid. Trust in God. Trust also in me. My peace I give you, not as the world gives peace.” And then he goes on to say this, as if to say that this perspective is the key to that greater peace. Jesus says: “In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you."²

Have you ever heard someone define Christianity as essentially about “pie in the sky when you die?” Before I became a Christian, I used to dismiss the faith because it seemed so heavenly-minded as to be of no earthly use. But I no longer see things that way. I’ve lived long enough now to know that a knowledge of what comes at the end does transform how one lives in the now. For example, if I showed you a video-tape of an athletic event whose ultimate outcome was already determined as a victory for your team, I guarantee you would not chew your nails so much through it.

That’s how it is with the Christian life. We know that at the end there is pie when you die; there is victory for those on Christ’s team; in short there is the assurance of eternal joy. The writer of Hebrews tells us that "for the joy set before him [Christ] endured the cross, disregarding its
"shame," and took his seat "at the right hand of the throne of God." That’s why Paul wrote to the church at Philippi: "Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

I don't know what stresses you are facing today. But this we can know if we know Jesus: The worries of this present time will seem awfully small when we are standing in the mansions of heaven. There will come a day when we will laugh and shake our heads in amazement that we could ever have been so short-sighted about life. Friends, peace is what grows within us when we choose to see the EVENTS in our lives through the lens of eternal joy.

**Putting on the Glasses of God: The Lens of Eternal Love**

The absolute confidence Jesus had in God's ultimate purpose allowed him to respond to even the greatest moments of anxiety and conflict a person might endure with a gentle peace. Yet what is so striking about Jesus is that he meets not only the worrisome events of his life, but also Herod and Pilate and all the troublesome people who crossed his path, with a serenity that is simply extraordinary.

How is Jesus able to do that? And how might we? The secret lies again, I believe, in disciplining oneself to look at the world not through the eyes of human understanding but through the lens of eternity. You see, Jesus didn't just look at the events of his life in the light of God's ultimate plan; he saw the people in his life in the same way. Just as he saw worrisome circumstances in the light of the joy of heaven, so he saw troublesome people in the light of the love of God. And, oh, what a difference that made.

Jesus looked at an arrogant fisherman whom others mocked for how he'd failed, and chose to see instead how he might one day stand strong. So Jesus said to Simon Peter: "On this Rock I will build my church." Jesus gazed at a degraded whore whom the crowd hated for her lust, and chose to see instead the vessel of love she could become. So he said to Mary: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." Jesus looked at a greedy tax collector whom the world despised for what he'd stolen, and chose to see instead what he might give. So he said to Zacchaeus: "Come down my friend, that I might dine with you today." Jesus looks at you and me, whom others may view as self-absorbed or set in our ways, and chooses to see instead a disciple in the making. So he says gently to us: "Come, follow me."

Lawrence C. Smith once wrote: "I never have found peace of mind by giving folks a piece of mine.” But when I have dared to love them as Jesus loves them -- as Jesus loves me -- I find there grows in me and them a peace and power beyond compare.

So "I urge you..." said Saint Paul, "be of the same mind in the Lord... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things.” Choose to see instead these things in the people around you.

Do you really want your life to be filled with peace? Then seek to know Jesus above all else. That will lead you to choose to see the events in your life through the lens of the eternal joy God has promised. It will help you to see the people in your life through the lens of eternal love – the kind of hopeful love God has for you. Put on these glasses, "and the peace of God which
transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Let us pray....

God, as we go from this place today, convince us in our inmost being that our hearts will be restless until they find their rest in thee. Help us to meet the worries of this week with a joyful confidence in your ultimate plan. And make us bearers of that hopeful love we have known most perfectly in Jesus our Lord, the Prince of Peace, in whose name we pray. Amen.

1 Philippians 3:8-9
2 John 14: various verses
3 Hebrews 12:2
4 Philippians 2:5
5 Matthew 16:18
6 John 8:11
7 Luke 19:5
8 Matthew 19:21