

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple
Sunday, October 11, 2020

Philippians 4:1-9

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. I urge Euodia, and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 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. Rejoice in the Lord always; Again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The LORD is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. 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. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When did you last get knocked off your feet?

Figuratively or literally - knocked down, have to get up?

I tried to avoid a gaggle of elementary aged campers singing songs and walking slowly towards me on a path. I veered off the sidewalk to go around them, and without warning, my head ran smack dab into a low tree limb. Embarrassed in front of all those campers, I got up, checked for injury and continued home - body intact, pride wounded.

Figuratively, last weekend I got knocked off my feet in the Idlewild church parking lot.

Saturday, we hosted an additional Food Bank distribution run exclusively by teenagers and a few adult helpers. Checking in on each of the volunteer stations, I moved to the back parking lot. The youth were managing the lines of cars queued up for food. A woman had her window rolled down and actively scolded our volunteer because another driver had gotten out of order and moved in ahead of her. From her perspective, it wasn't fair or just.

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She was frustrated. I listened for a short second and didn't like her tone. The teen was a first-time volunteer. To be clear, I stood in judgment of her. I tried a redirect. "Aren't these youth awesome?" She was mad and just looked at me in disgust. So, I tried direct. "I see you are frustrated. Can I beg your patience, please? We are trying the best we can."

Well.

Some might say, "I got schooled."

I would say, "I got knocked off my feet."

Her eyes seared into mine.

Everything went silent, except the clearness of her voice.

Firmly she said, "I am patient. I have been waiting for food since 6:00 am this morning."

Her eyes kept mine. My mind raced. It didn't take long for me to remember those lines from MLK's letter from a Birmingham Jail, that the greatest stumbling block to racial equity "wasn't the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." Be patient the white moderates asked. Be patient.

There I was in the instability of that moment, knocked off balance, more devoted to order than justice. Her challenge forced me, forces us, to examine the bigger systems that allow some to profit in a pandemic while others starve.

Paul says, "Let your gentleness be known. If anything is true, honorable, or just - think on these things."

For the context of the letter to the believers in Philippi, it helps to know that Acts 16 describes Paul's missionary journey to the Roman colony, Philippi. Paul travels with Timothy and Silas and they get to know the people of Philippi. The early church was strengthened by their visits.

They met a range of people rich and poor, those who listen and those who taunt. And they grow to love the people of Philippi.

They meet a wealthy woman, Lydia, who sells purple cloth. She listens eagerly to the stories about Jesus and God opens her heart and transforms her into a believer. Transformed - she invites the missionaries into her home where her whole household is converted.

Paul and Silas meet a slave girl who was a fortune teller. The bible says Paul was annoyed by her taunts, "These men are slaves of the Most High God" He turns to her and performs an exorcism. The owners angered at the loss of their financial capital based on her "talents" and have Paul and Silas jailed.

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While imprisoned, an earthquake springs open the jail doors. Paul and his friends say to the jailer, "Do not harm yourself, we are all here." Paul's staying put and presence in the jail turned into transformation for that jailer, and his household, who came to profess faith in Christ.

These folk in Philippi that Paul, Timothy and Silas meet, become like brothers and sisters, joy and crown, beloved. Paul grew to love and care for them and sees their faith in Christ as part of his important work with Christ. It's the content of the whole letter of Philippians - Paul lives his transformed life in Christ's strength, and modeling living like Christ - who humbled himself, literally emptied himself - for the sake of God's love. Paul longs to visit his good friends and family again, but he can't. Imprisoned in Rome, he writes. The letter is Paul's encouragement to the people of Philippi - to stand firm in the Lord.

This letter is about how *not* to get knocked off your feet by the ways of the world. The Philippians were living under the Reign of Emperor Nero who was known for his tyranny. Ancient writers blame Nero for starting the great fire of Rome that left little of the city untouched - only 4 of 14 quarters remained. It was said he "*fiddled*" while the city burned. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire.

Christians faced these extreme conditions for loyalty to Christ, instead of Emperor Nero.

"Rejoice!" Paul says. He says it again, "And again I say, rejoice. The Lord is near." He urges those in Philippi to stand firm - especially - to help the women who are struggling with some unnamed conflict. We don't and can't know the root of the conflict. We do know that these women suffered with Paul for Christ's sake. And that matters.

Paul implores his brothers and sisters to help in a very specific way ... to be of the same mind in the LORD. When Christ is at the center, we're different people. We risk ourselves, and maybe even our loyalties, to be bound in standing with another in Christ's love. We listen, and maybe even set aside our judgment, to be bound with another in Christ's love. We can't dismiss differences with phrases like, "Politics don't belong in the pulpit" because we acknowledge that standing firm in Christ acknowledges that God's justice runs counter to the ways of the world. The church has a witness to make these days. We have to be better than the world before us which is entrapped in decline, disruption and despair.

As we stand bound in Christ's love we rejoice, let our gentleness be known to everyone.

As we stand bound in Christ's love, we do so because we trust the LORD, our guide and guard, is near.

Paul engenders the community in Philippi, and us, to think about these things. The things of God which are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. Not just to think, but to keep on doing these things that help individuals and a community to stand firm and bound in Christ's love.

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Quoting the insight of Bill O'Brien, Hanover Insurance CEO, "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener." The interior condition of the intervener. We are called to intervene. Paul reminds us that our individual and collective "interior condition" must be of one mind in the Lord.

I recognize that we are not of "one mind" when it comes to our politics. And the gospel makes it clear that we are to serve and to live in God's love in Jesus Christ in all things. This is not some false sense of unity but hard work.

In their song, "We Stand" The Many sings that hope comes to us when we stand together in Christ's love. The chorus reminds us of what we know too well to be true,

"We've all been hurt. When there is so much pain,
and so much broken, ... Let us not sit in judgment or only
bow in prayer; let us not leave in anger or stay in our
despair. Let's stand."

The song, *We Stand*, suggests a simple dependence on the One who strengthens us, Jesus Christ. And that's what Paul wants in this letter to the Philippians. That's why Paul reminds the people, "God is near. Your names are written in the book of life."

In that parking lot last Saturday, in that moment of conflict with the Food Bank guest who I asked to be patient, ... in humility ... all I could say was, "Please forgive me." And lock eyes in Christ.

In these days, in moments when we find ourselves in conflict with another, I am prayerful that we will, as God's people - know how to serve, standing in Christ Jesus' love. We stand. Amen.