

Proper 23 (A)
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Philippians 4:4-13
TLC, Keene, NH

PEACE SHALL REIGN

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Introduction

Well, it has been reaffirmed more than once during this election season: “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Where, acc. to the Declaration of Independence, these are our “inalienable rights.” Yet, “ever since mankind’s fall into sin, unregenerate man has been pursuing happiness apart from God with predictable results.” [*Sermon Studies on the Epistles (SSoE)*, A, 342]

Neil Postman was/is still correct, in his assessment of today’s society [*Amusing Ourselves to Death*], surmising that it’s not the threat of Big Brother that will be our undoing, but that of pleasure ... and our seemingly insatiable appetite to feel good, so that nothing is out of bounds in this never-ending quest!

Not so for one borne of water, Spirit and the Word.

Main Thought: True joy, contentment and peace are found in only one place ... in Christ alone. “To the rich and to the poor, to the sick and to the healthy, to the down and out, to the up and coming, the message [in Him] remains the same: Rejoice in the Lord!” [*SSoE*, 342]

ONLY GOD’S PEACE BRINGS JOY TO OUR LIVES.

Amen.

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They are among Paul’s last recorded words. Where, “the tone of the passage is endearing and reassuring, yet filled with straight talk and clear directives. [Here] we are hearing Paul the father, pastor, and teacher give words of lasting [comfort] and advice.” [*Craddock, et. al. Preaching through the Christian Year*, A, 472]

Not unlike a conversation a parent might have with a child who is headed off to college – where we would bless them with a final word for the journey ... here, in the vv. leading up to our text, “*to stand firm in the Lord, to agree in the Lord*” [vv. 1-3], and then ...

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

NB: we can do none of these things – to stand firm, to agree or to rejoice – except it be “*in the Lord.*”

Yes, such is our confidence, as it is because “the child of God will always find cause for rejoicing since his [her] joy is not based on the ups and downs of everyday life, nor upon the temporary and sometimes artificial happiness which the world has to offer. His [her] joy is ... a fruit of the Holy Spirit [Galatians 5:22] who calls [us] to faith through the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ.” [SSoE 338]

Experienced how? In knowing that our sins are forgiven. That God is not some distant deity, but truly present in our concerns. Such joy can never be taken away. Ask Hannah [1 Samuel 2:1]. Ask David [1 Chronicles 16:10]. Or Nehemiah [8:10]. Or Job [22:6], Mary [Luke 1:47] or Peter [1 Peter 4:13]. [Adapted SSoE, 338]

“Hand in hand” with them, Paul also exhorts us:

*“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. **He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.**”* [I Thessalonians 5:23-24]

Where might you use that joy, and its resulting peace, today?

Wherein, to be sure, “we are vulnerable. From without. ... From within. ... [Where, in a not too distant story, all too familiar in our time] Two Miami parents [are left to] grieve over a twenty-two-year-old son who lost his life through indiscretions in the drug traffic. The husband related, “‘I’m bitter. I’m angry. I want to kill. My wife and I are like two rattlesnakes now watching each other. We have nothing.’” [Warneck, CJ, July 1993, 267]

Again, where might you use God's peace today ... where, in our time, it seems in all too short of a supply? Indeed, where, on earth, do we find it?

First, by casting the whole of our life in light of *His* eternal view.

5 *Let your reasonableness* [“gentleness, generosity, considerateness”¹] ***be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand*** [not only in His final return, but *now* – spatially, sacramentally – *in our time*²] ...

Everything takes on a new perspective in seeing that it all fails in comparison with the incomparable joy of the Lord's return.

ILLUSTRATION: Some of mosaics I saw in Israel ... close up, you can't see the whole picture ... step back, you can! As does our heavenly Father. “Entrust your days and burdens” to Him.

Yes, this is the reason for our confidence – the reassurance that our times are in His hands ... that “the Lord is near” [v. 5] ... whose “presence is experienced as peace, understood not merely as the absence of strife, but as the state of positive well-being and fullness” ... experienced not only in the then, but also the now. [Craddock, 473]³ As He comes to us in Word and Sacrament. Bringing ...

Secondly, a peace that comes about by cultivating it in prayer.

6 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

¹ “Willingness to yield one's legal right for the good of another” [*Sermon Studies on the Epistles (SSoE)*, A, 338]

² Lessing, *CJ*, 28:3, 320

³ Here, “the Christian rejoices in the second coming of the Lord Jesus as he [she] remembers the Savior's gracious promises [Luke 21:28; John 14:1ff]. Through the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus, the child of God has been given a guarantee of a glorious life to come, a life filled with God's wonderful gifts of love [2 Corinthians 12:2-4; Revelation 21:1ff].” [*SSoE*, 339]

7 And [i.e. “as a result of letting God handle all worries and concerns”⁴] **the peace of God** [or, “which God has and gives”⁵], **which surpasses all understanding, will guard** [as real as the sentinel who stood guard the at the prison door of the apostle Paul⁶] **your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

“Worry finds no room in the heart filled with the ‘one thing needed.’” [SSoE, 339]

“Part and parcel of such rejoicing is being able to pray, which includes giving thanks as well as making petitions to the Lord [v. 6]. [Yes] to be ‘*in the Lord,*’ that is, to be Christian, is to pray ... the earmark of Christian existence ... the anecdote to anxiety.” [Craddock, 473] Prayer, in essence, is “faith breathing.”

ILLUSTRATION: “You got to pray, pray, you got to pray just to make it today!” That’s how M.C. Hammer once put it. Or better still, the singer/songwriter David:

“*Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.*” [Ps 55:22]

“We are not victims of chance or fate. If we cannot sort meaning out of confusion surrounding us, our Lord is able to do so. ... All things are in His hands.” [Warneck, 268]

Wherein, thirdly, peace comes in our dwelling on all that is good.

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

A number of years ago, out of period of depression and despair, I began including in my prayer journal a section entitled “Grace Happenings” ... where, most days I stop to pause and reflect on the good things in life ... [note Friday’s].

⁴ SSoE, 340

⁵ SSoE, 340

⁶ Or, stands watch at the door or city gate [SSoE, 340]

Very simply: prayer = peace, as is dwelling on the fruit of that prayer in our lives – in God’s continued dealings with us as His children. Wherein, a colleague of mine puts it this way: “The way to be anxious about nothing is to pray specifically about everything! ... Pray about *everything* + give thanks in *all things* + think about the *right things* = God’s peace that surpasses *anything!*” [Lessing, CJ, 28:3, 321]

Where, peace *also* comes in doing those things that flow from a heart redeemed of Jesus ... of one, again, “*in the Lord.*”

9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice [as in a continuous fashion] these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

In essence, Paul is saying “keep doing what you are doing ... what is right, true and good. For in so doing, there is peace.”

“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”
[Luke 11:28]

“[For] the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” [James 1:25]

It’s one of the oft-neglected cures for a depressed soul: reviving and renewing your concern for another. Here, Paul would not boast so much in the gifts he has received from this congregation of saints, but in what they signify – that is, a willing and ready heart to demonstrate kindness, that, once given the opportunity, they held nothing back.

And the holy result? Peace! Towards others ... but also:

Finally, peace by way of what others do for us “*in the Lord,*” ... leading Paul to this profound truth:

*10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived [“let grow green again”] your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, **for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.***

It's a tall order, isn't it? Seemingly impossible, were it not for this critical caveat: a peace that does not depend on what we can muster up in ourselves, but a peace that comes through Christ.

12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Conclusion

LEONARD GRIFFITH [English Theologian & Author]: God's peace does not protect us against failure but against the pessimism that failure brings, not against sorrow and bereavement but against hopelessness and despair, not against illness and disease but against the spirit of murmuring and complaining, not against weapons that can hurt the body but against the weapons that can destroy the peace of mind." [Warneck, 268]

OR ...

Admiral Horatio Nelson was perhaps Britain's most decorated naval hero. One of his crew who sailed with him once wrote this in his journal, after a bitter campaign in the West Indies: "We are half-starved, and otherwise inconvenienced by being so long out of port. But our reward is – we are with Nelson!" [269]

From whence does such a peace or calm in come? In Christ!

Turn off the CSI the NCIS and look to **IHS** [those first three Greek letters in the name Jesus that appear on our altar coverings, banners or stoles]. Look to Him ... and to the ways He provides: casting our lives in light of His eternal view, approaching Him in prayer, thinking about right things ... and doing them, out of a heart that is redeemed and continually kept "*in the Lord.*"

Such is the nature of our peace ... to say, "I am with Christ, and Christ is with me." Indeed, being "*in the Lord,*" "you have within your hearts and minds the very peace of heaven. And having that peace of God, you may believe, the future is bright as the promises of God!" [Warneck, 269] *Amen.*