

Sermon for Proper 23, Year A: Philippians 4:1-9 – October 9, 2011
St. Faith's Episcopal Church, Cutler Bay, Florida
Preacher: The Rev. Jennie Lou D. Reid+

*In midst of affliction my table is spread,
with blessings unmeasured my cup runneth o'er;
With perfume and oil thou anointest my head;
O what shall I ask of thy providence more?ⁱ Amen.*

When our children were growing up, life seemed chaotic for me. Multi-tasking was my daily challenge, as I juggled my variety of roles, including chauffeur, chef, counselor, community volunteer and active participant in the church. In those days the singular measure of my management skill was the sideboard in our dining room. Since we routinely ate in the kitchen, the sideboard became the catch-all for mail, papers from meetings, magazines, and projects in progress. (Anyone who has caught sight of my desk can imagine the arrangement.) I fretted over this eyesore but resigned myself to this messy condition. Eventually the addition of one lone paper would set off the avalanche, and I would have to start shoveling the white stuff. At times life's sideboards consume a considerable space in our thoughts.

Ever since meeting Jesus on that road to Damascus, the Apostle Paul has focused his life on a singular mission: to proclaim to the whole world (as he knew

it) the wonderful words of life in the good news of Jesus, our Loving Lord, Grace-filled Savior and Steadfast Friend. Paul has traveled over roads and seas to carry this news to those whose spirits long for more than a pantheon of gods and goddesses, more than graven images, more than astrological charts, even more than fortune tellers, as carriers of super-human power. During his travels Paul established small communities of persons who accepted Christ into their hearts and willingly submitted their bodies to baptism as a sign of their trust in Jesus. Even as Paul's journeys took him to new places, he took time to write to these new-born Christians in order to expand his teaching and offer encouragement.

Although Paul cared for all these church communities one of those dearest to his heart was the one in Philippi, on the coast of northern Greece. Perhaps the Philippians were precious to Paul because their church was his first "baby," the first church to take root on his missionary journeys. In this letter Paul seeks to affirm their mutual goodwill and to nurture their fledgling faith. Paul declares his delight in remembering them but urges them to adopt a spirit of humility – a humility that looks to Jesus as a role model – and to stretch spiritually by developing life-giving habits. The keys to spiritual health, Paul says, are with intentional to rejoice in the Lord, to repair relationships, and to focus on the good.

American culture today seems to focus not on the good but on the bad and the ugly. Periodicals near the cash register at any grocery store slap us in the face with the infidelity, duplicity, and selfishness of society's idols – entertainers, politicians, athletes, and more. The mantra of a television news staff is “If it bleeds, it leads.” Apparently we are more likely to turn off the set or change the channel if the announcer is celebrating a heroic act or a community accomplishment. We can find ourselves consumed by the frustrations and annoyances in our own lives, too – the driver who zooms past us with horn blaring, the clerk on the cell phone who ignores our presence at the counter, or the neighbor who plays loud music at all hours. We think about these offenses, and we grumble to our friends.

I have been wondering why we focus on the negative. Perhaps we imagine the worst possibilities so that we can be prepared for anything that may happen. In our desire to stay in control, we want to identify potential dangers. Some shun optimism in order to protect themselves from disappointment or to ward off bad luck. Thus, we gnash our teeth over our team's errors in an athletic contest so that we will be delightfully surprised with victory and emotionally prepared for defeat. And we take an umbrella with us so that it will not rain. (You know showers occur only when we forget our umbrellas!) Also, people listen to us when we groan

about our woes, and they express their caring as they commiserate or offer helpful suggestions. This was my experience with my sideboard challenge. When I spoke about it to my friends, they helped me to feel normal about my shameful weakness. As a result, the act of sharing my misery helped me feel connected to other people. Looking at the sideboard made me feel alone, but talking about it opened my eyes to the goodwill of friends in my life.

But we pay a personal price for this way of living. First, our focus on the unpleasant keeps us in a permanent state of anxiety, agitation, and sometimes fear. It can compromise our health. And in some cases our dour disposition actually nudges others to flee from our presence. Most importantly, as we look for all that is wrong, we fail to catch sight of the blessings God is pouring down on us every day.

Paul writes to the Philippians from prison. A Roman prison was a simple operation. There were cells with bars and locks and keys. That was all. Bedding, blankets, clean clothes, food, and anything else needed for personal care had to come from friends. In his letters Paul thanks his friends for their prayers and practical support, including the supplies that allowed him to continue his ministry through letter-writing. He does not know what tomorrow will bring. He relies

totally on the grace of God. Yet in this vulnerable condition, Paul is full of joy. Paul shows us that joy is a choice that does not require a pleasant life situation.

When Paul is writing this letter to the Philippians, he does not know whether he will have another chance to communicate with them. His executioner may arrive at any moment to sever his head from his body. We need to understand that Paul is moved here to provide the wisest advice he knows to people he loves. Here Paul urges his Brothers and Sisters in Christ to take the high road:

- First, rejoice in the LORD always. This is the intent of the author of Psalm 34 who penned these opening lines: “I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall ever be in my mouth.”ⁱⁱ We can rejoice in God through tears and heartache, even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, because we trust in God’s compassionate loving care for us.
- Meanwhile, remember that the LORD is near. This means that we are not alone. God sees our circumstances and understands our needs. Furthermore God is responsive to us. As we remember God’s blessings, we lift up today’s concerns from a grateful heart. Worrying is a waste of time that robs us of energy for abundant living. Instead, we can look out for God’s new blessings that are coming our way!
- Always treat others kindly. Refrain from swagger and destructive criticism. Be gentle and considerate with others. You do not know what burdens they are carrying. Overcome evil with good.

- Encourage those in the church who disagree with each other to strive for harmony in the midst of their disagreement. Do not demand agreement, but instead seek understanding and embrace mutual respect.
- Finally, fill your mind with positive thoughts. Focus on truth, honor, justice, and purity, the pleasant, the commendable, the excellent, and the laudable. Paul is not suggesting that we adopt a fake optimism or plastic cheerfulness. Instead he is urging us to take charge of the thoughts that fill our conscious minds. The Tao, a sacred text from the Orient, asserts: “Change your thoughts and change your life.” Similarly the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson surmised, “A man is what he thinks about all day long.” Computer folks note, “Garbage in, garbage out.” As we grow in self-awareness, we gain control over the way we perceive and process our experiences.

The reward of this way of living is not just an eventual welcome into heaven (as great as that is). Instead, it makes our experience on earth more heavenly. A rejoicing heart and a hopeful mind fill us with that inner state of wholeness we call peace. As a barometer of your “positive thinking index,” I invite you to notice your response to the following poem, entitled “Sometimes,” by Sheenagh Pugh.

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail.
Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war,
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best intentions do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen; may it happen for you.

It may seem strange for us to imagine life as full of possibility, but that is the essence of the gospel. The Creator brought life into being in infinite variety. God the Son became flesh and pitched his tent in the midst of the human community, loved us to death, and then revealed that our destiny was not death but new life flowing from our essence and moving beyond to a blessed place called Paradise. We are not bounded by inevitability. Our lives find energy and excitement in our well-founded hope in the providence and imagination of the God of Grace and Glory.

In closing I want to share with you the remarkable reminiscences and conclusions of Mary Morris, whose husband Thomas, a Post Office employee in Washington, D. C., died after exposure to the Anthrax-laced powder sent through the mail a decade ago. *[Play the piece from this link:*

<http://www.npr.org/2011/10/07/141122330/remembering-a-man-and-a-marriage.>*]*

Each of us has the power to focus our thinking on the good and the uplifting. We can choose to see God's generous hand tossing out blessings. The Lord is near. Be still and know the source of abundant Life. Amen.

ⁱ *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, Hymn 104, verse 3

ⁱⁱ Psalm 34:1