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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 23
October 15, 2017
Philippians 4:1-9

The first verse of the popular song published in 1944 goes like this:

You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between

In describing his inspiration for the lyrics, Johnny Mercer said that it came from a sermon by a popular preacher at the time named Father Divine in which he proclaimed, “you’ve got to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.” Within weeks, the other recordings of the song were released by well-known artists like Bing Crosby, The Andrew Sisters, Dinah Washington, and Artie Shaw. Since then, the song has been recorded by many other artists such as Connie Francis, Aretha Franklin, Al Jarreau, Paul McCartney, and even a Chicago punk band.

Americans love optimism and positive thinking. We embrace a can-do attitude towards life and cover all sorts of unhappiness with a thin blanket of platitudes such as “just think positive” “the power of positive thinking” “don’t worry, be happy” “we need to stay positive.” We encourage each other to see the bright side of any situation and we comfort ourselves that there will always be a silver lining.

Search for “positive thinking” in Amazon.com and you will find a never-ending supply of products designed to help us see life through rose-colored lenses, including a “Power of Positive Thinking” wall calendar and an “Overcoming Adversity with Encouragement and Affirmation” poster series. All around us, there are so-called experts who tell us to be a “glass half-full” person and to always look on the bright side of life. In our quieter moments, removed from the constant noise of our culture, we sense the shaky thinness of this idolatry of the power of our own thinking generated by our deep existential fear that we might not possess as much power over our own destinies as we would like.

If we allow ourselves to really think about it, we realize the absurd insubstantiality of this. Whenever I see these ubiquitous motivational tokens of pop-psychology, I am reminded of Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley, Al Franken’s famous skit on Saturday Night Live in which he parodied just this sort of insipid self-help. The skit always began the same way, with Stuart Smalley gazing into the mirror and affirming himself: “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and, doggonit, people like me!”

So strong our drive for optimism, we have even wrapped theology in it, creating a dangerous rationalization called the Prosperity Gospel. We write books that claim to reveal the “Secret” underpinnings of life that, if we just stay positive and dream big, we will be rewarded and good things will come our way. If only we pray to God or “put it out to the universe,” we will receive, as if there were some great ATM in the sky. Sadly, in these theologies, we reduce a religion of faithfulness and covenantal fidelity to a transcendent and all-powerful God to mere magical thinking – a quid pro quo transactional arrangement in which we control the forces of God, or the “universe”, by thinking and acting in certain ways.

So, I often find myself of two minds then when I listen to Paul's exhortation to his brothers and sisters of the Church in Phillipi. On the one hand, my heart rises and sings every time I hear Paul's spirit-filled exhortation: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Paul reminds us that "the Lord is near" and because that is so, we should not worry but rejoice! In these words, my spirit is lifted and I feel a bit of the wonderful peace I experience when I have centered myself again in God.

Then on the other hand, sometimes my inner cynic comes out and my reaction to this lesson turns. It starts to sound a bit like Stuart Smalley and Paul's words of cheer and joy can feel vapid and thin. How can I rejoice in the face of the violence and hatred in the world today? How do I find the joy-filled presence of the Lord when I suffer from clinical depression? When I am homeless? When I am hungry? How do I feel peaceful when the bank is foreclosing on my house and I can't find decent-paying work? How can I feel thankful when I feel so very alone and frightened?

Sometimes it feels as though Christians want to brush away these very real worries with an overly cheerful insistence that we just need to "have faith" and "trust in God." Questionable and damaging theology can come from this push for optimistic belief rather than a faithfulness that is more complex and robust. As one writer Debie Thomas put it, "Too often, Christians demand of each other a Pollyanna-ish cheerfulness that refuses to look the complexities of real life in the face. As if our faith – and, by extension, our God – is too fragile to handle life's dark side without a generous side serving of grinning emojis."¹

But I don't believe that this is what Paul is doing when he exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord always. I believe that Paul understands quite fully the difficulties that mortal, fragile, and sinful human life presents. Paul writes this letter from prison, while awaiting trial and a likely sentence to death. His ministry was not an easy one; he was a man who was threatened, rejected, beaten, and shipwrecked. He writes as having a "thorn in the flesh" that God apparently did not heal. Paul gave up all he had for the gospel, living a life sustained at the mercy of the goodness and grace of others. He was haunted by his past of violence and contempt, as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus. He knew what humans were capable of, both the good and the bad. As Thomas writes, Paul was no Pollyanna; he was a tried and true realist.²

With this in mind, Paul's spirit-filled exhortations take on new and deeper meaning. They are less about feeling good as they are about cultivating the inner life of the soul. They are about moving beyond the thin veil of happiness and inhabiting the true joy that may be found beneath and behind. In Paul's view, peace and joy are not merely emotions we can generate within ourselves. They are gifts from God that we may receive, or not, through lives shaped by prayer, supplication, gentleness, and contemplation.³

That Paul proclaims the reality of joy, peace, and love found in the midst of fear, anger, and violence takes on credibility for me. When those who have suffered from the violence of hate can proclaim love, my heart listens. When those who have suffered the parsimony of scarcity yet reveal generous abundance, I am transformed. When those who have suffered the pain of acedia and deep loneliness yet reveal new lives of deep communion with God and others, the scales drop from my eyes and I glimpse the kingdom of God.

¹ Thomas, Debie; "Sunday's Coming: When Paul Sounds Like Pollyanna" *The Christian Century*

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Paul's words are not just blithe platitudes or a call to delusional and insipid happiness, but rather an invitation to wade into the deep streams of life. An invitation to abide in the peace and joy found beneath the comforting veneer of the happiness we so often seek. The joy that Paul proclaims is one that requires that we choose neither the Siren calls of optimism nor cynicism. To live in this joy requires that we hold two realities at the same time: the reality of the brokenness of the world in one hand and the reality of God's love and mercy in the other. This joy requires that we stop trying to reconcile these opposing realities, and instead accept that, as long as we remain east of Eden, they both exist. Joy is what happens when we live in that uncertain land between and within both realities, and do so in faith that our almighty, all-merciful, and yet unfathomable God will, somehow, bridge the divide between the world as we see it and the world that we long for.

Paul assures us, from personal experience, that when we are faithful with God, God will be faithful with us. "The Lord is near" he writes. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This is joy at its most powerful, most robust.

So, this morning, I proclaim: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." May God give us the courage daily to open our hearts to God's love and peace. As we are transformed with the light of God's love, may we also open our hearts to each other, sharing the peace and joy we have found in Christ. As we are strengthened together, may our hearts be opened even further still, magnifying and amplifying God's light and love into the world.

Amen.