

Whatever Is Gracious

Once again, we have as our sermon focus, a portion of Paul's thank you note to the Philippians. And, once again, his thoughts soar heavenward as he lifts the hearts and spirits of this devoted congregation, dear to his heart.

At the end of today's reading, Paul commends to the church some admirable traits that are drawn from Greek ethicists of his day! It's as if he is encouraging followers of Jesus to emulate the best of humanity! (which of course we believe Jesus exemplified!)

The first thing that comes to mind as I 'consider' this list is that Paul's eloquent letter itself is such a fine example of "what is gracious and worthy of praise". Isn't it?

A quick perusal of this epistle yields such memorable verses. Let me just share a few:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness..." Phil 2:5-7

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you..."
4:12

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" 4:13

And, let's not forget one of the gems we're centering on today, frequently used as a benediction: "The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord".

We are living in a day and age when we are constantly bombarded with bad news- often shocking news of human cruelty and violence, greed and corruption, indulgence and indifference- instances of humanity at its worst. Yet, in the midst of these stories of selfishness and sin, we also witness some examples of humanity at its best.

For instance, how about Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Didn't she pretty much embody all of the admirable qualities cited by Paul: gracious, honorable, true, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise...?

And a trait not mentioned by Paul, but appreciated by all, is that RBG was not just smart, she was wise! It doesn't mean she was without faults; she, herself could poke fun at herself. Nor does it mean that we have to agree with her judicial decisions. But, even at five feet tall, RBG was someone we could all look up to and admire, wasn't she? And one of the chief reasons for us to do so, is because she embraced so many of the virtues that Paul tried to put into practice. Virtues representing the best of human conduct, regardless of one's religion or faith stance. Paul is not considering "good Christian" behavior here, but exemplary "human" behavior. For each one of these qualities has its source in God, in whose image all of us are created.

Side by side with Paul's lofty goals for living, we find some very practical words of wisdom for daily life as well, especially life in the church. In verse 2, Paul singles out two women at First Church Phillipi who, for some reason, aren't seeing eye to eye on some issue.

Notice that Paul doesn't side with either one of them, but urges them to "be of the same mind in the Lord". If we want to review what that expression "the same mind" means in this context, all we need to do is to look at some of his earlier words on the subject in this same letter. Having the same mind as Christ's means doing nothing from selfishness or conceit. It means not simply looking after one's own interests, but considering the interests of others in the community as important as your own. It also means remembering the higher purposes of God's call in Christ, purposes which are bigger than any one's self.

Paul is lifting up a vision of community where mutual respect and caring for one another is a given.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche villages for the disabled, writes from his own experience that "a community is only a (genuine) community when the majority of its members is making the transition from "the community for myself" to "myself for the community".

A third teaching from today's lesson may be the most challenging of all, especially in these days of increased anxiety and fear.

Paul tells us to "Rejoice in the Lord, always". (Not just once but twice!)

What seems impossible to some, and absurd to others, is not so strange, when we remember that the source of joy is readily at hand. In between the imperatives “Rejoice always” and “Don’t worry” is a fundamental affirmation of our faith: “the Lord is near”

We don’t rejoice, abstractly, or at will, just because someone tells us to. We rejoice in the Lord who is our Shepherd; we rejoice in the Lord who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death; we rejoice in the Lord, who faithfully and mercifully supplies our needs, because we are God’s children. We rejoice in the Lord because we are deeply connected to the love of God which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

From the time he was a boy, Jesus would have been familiar with David’s Psalm which we refer to as Psalm 23: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”. Like Jesus’ parable, David uses the figure of a shepherd to portray God. One particular paraphrase of Psalm 23 that I find meaningful is a Native American version, originating from a tribe in Nevada. It goes like this:

*“The Great Father above a Shepherd is.
I am his and with him I want not.
He throws out a rope and
The name of that rope is love. And
He draws me to where the grass is green
And the water not dangerous.
And I eat and lie down and am satisfied.”*

I was very moved, specifically, by the line referring to a rope. I have known times in my own life when I have felt unmoored. Yet those often have been the times when I’ve been thrown a rope named love; and that has made all the difference.

In this same passage, Paul also reminds us of a very practical way of handling our cares and worries. He writes: “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made know to God”. In other words, “Don’t worry, pray”.

'First things first', which for us means seeking God first. It seems clear to me that Paul is passing on what he first learned from Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat? Or 'What will we drink? But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well".

Notice that when Paul encourages us to pray, he adds a simple phrase that can diffuse our anxieties and fears and help us draw closer to God. The phrase is: 'with thanksgiving' .

Giving thanks can recalibrate our mindsets and awaken our faith. For the practice of gratitude involves remembering the many ways that God has remembered us; the times that God has blessed us; moments when God's light has shined upon us! When we are wondering "where is God?", a more practical question to ask ourselves is: "when is God?"

One such moment occurs when our worries are replaced by a deep peace-a peace that surpasses human understanding- a peace that is not a human achievement, but a gift promised to us by or Lord himself:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14:27

Amen.