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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ *Thoughts Worth Thinking*

The Rev. Karin Hejmanowski ~ October 23, 2011

Philippians 4:4-9

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

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, 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.

Psalm 19:7-11, 14

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

You know those kinds of phone calls that just don't seem to be able to end? Sometimes it's great because you're talking with your best friend or a friend from long ago and there's just so much to catch up on that it just seems okay that the conversation or phone call just can't be brought to a close. And sometimes it's that the other person just won't stop talking...even though you'd like to end it. You try again and again to bring the conversation or the phone call to an end, but somehow the other person makes it pretty much impossible to end it. You may be in a hurry

with many things to accomplish, but you're stuck there on the phone. Or you may be rolling your eyes to someone in the same room who is also vying for your attention in an attempt to let them know you'd really rather be talking to them! Or maybe YOU'RE the one that makes it impossible to hang up!

The Apostle Paul loved the people of the church of Philippi. And it seems pretty clear that the feeling is mutual. He is quite expressive in telling them how much he cares for them and misses them. And in this letter to them, he seems to have a little bit of a difficult time ending the letter. In chapter three, he had said "Finally", which makes us think he's coming to the end of his letter. But here in 4:8, he says it again. I've heard pastors do that in sermons and know that whereas here I think they were eager to hang on every word he said, that's not always been my reaction to sermons that have several 'finally's.

Now Paul wrote longer letters, but it seems that this is a note he didn't expect to go long, but he couldn't quite bring it to a conclusion. He just has so much that he would really like to share with them. He'd rather do it in person, but since that was not going to happen at this point, he was trying to pack in all he thought it was important for them to hear.

In any case, Paul's final "finally" is this list of the characteristics of things that are worthy of reflection and thought. He's trying to guide them toward those things that will build them up in all aspects of their life.

I long thought this was a list upon which Paul had reflected much to create. I imagined his hours in prison being spent, in part, carving various lofty ideals on the prison walls, crossing some out and adding others as they seemed better until he came to this final list.

However, historical research shows that this is a list of virtues that came out of Greek culture...they had been come to by the Greek ethicists. Much like the seven deadly sins...this is just the positive and perhaps less exhaustive list.

Christians of Paul's day, much as some Christians today, found it difficult to explain why pagans could be characterized by lives of virtue. Paul is not here accommodating to culture, but trying to point out that the same God who created those who believed in Jesus Christ, created all else as well. Where there is virtue, it is a reflection of that creation, whether credit is given to God or not. As a former president of my college often said, "All Truth is God's Truth."

Paul then personalizes it to say that whatever they have seen him do, they should do...which calls us to believe that he was, much of the time, characterized by these values.

Now I gotta say that this seems much more easily intended than done. It's a worthy goal to have these thoughts always at the fore of our mind, but how do we do that? I'm sure there are lots of helpful hints and ways to go about it. I've been trying to reflect upon my own thought life as I've been considering this passage.

Now I sing a lot of toddler songs these days. Among the favorites at our house are The Itsy Bitsy Spider, Mary had a Little Lamb, and the top of the top hits chart is always and ever the “ABCD Song” as Josiah calls it. It’s sometimes requested in its traditional form and sometimes requested with the words that are new to me...”ABCD Dinosaur, that is what the “D” stands for. Dinosaurs come big and small. I like the spikey ones best of all. ABCD dinosaur, that is what the “D” stands for.”

The list of songs goes on and on. And I’m guessing you’re familiar with how a song can just get stuck in your head and refuse to leave. I think it was even before Josiah was born that Ken knew, if he wanted to bug me, all he needed to do was sing Row, Row, Row Your Boat or one or two other songs that I hate having stuck in my head, but seem to lodge there easily.

But so much of what gets stuck in our heads is about exposure, right? I mean, five years ago it would be surprising to find myself walking around thinking or singing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”. Now when I find myself singing it I can usually pretty easily look back and remember that Josiah was just singing that or that over the day I had heard five versions of it sung over our internet radio station. It’s a lot about exposure.

But it’s not all about toddler songs. I can find myself in a mood or state of mind that has me dwelling on thoughts that are not true, lovely, right, good, or noble. Then I have to think back to what has been going on in life. What have I been listening to, watching, reading, or interacting with that is impacting my thoughts and my outlook in this way? Is it something that needs to change? Do I need to change my music or the movies or shows I’m watching? Or sometimes perhaps it’s resulted from listening to news that is disturbing and it’s not that I’m listening to something that needs to be cut out, but I need to use what I hear as an impetus to pray for that situation and others like it rather than letting it pull me down into a haze of negativity. I don’t think or presume there’s an easy answer—though sometimes cutting stuff out is certainly appropriate--, but I find that I do better when I’m cognizant of what is going on in me rather than just riding the wave of all that surrounds me.

I was intrigued with this passage because of the two pieces that are placed near each other. In the verses just before this list of virtuous characteristics, Paul tells the Philippians, and thereby us, to rejoice in the Lord always and goes on to tell us to pray and that will bring the peace of God. It all just seems to intertwine. It’s hard to be in prayer and be filled with negativity. We can be in the midst of crisis and hopelessness and there’s a strength that comes from spending time in the presence of God. Looking beyond ourselves causes us to make a bit of space for God’s peace to begin to seep in. The peace of God that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Then comes the exhortation we spent some time on... We are to think about those things which are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy. And Paul tells us to put those into practice and the God of peace will be with us. There seems to be a relationship between being in prayer and focusing on those things which are praiseworthy.

Sometimes I wonder how practical all this is. I mean, I think many of us just check out when we hear a phrase like “pray without ceasing”, right? It’s almost like the seeming extremism of the call or command gives us permission to assume it’s not meant for us. Maybe it’s meant for clergy or maybe for the Billy Graham’s of the world, but not for regular people who live regular lives and just struggle to get the laundry done, let alone folded and put away or to keep up with the work emails, let alone personal email, LET ALONE conversation or depth of relationship with God.

But perhaps it’s better taken to be a call to start somewhere rather than count ourselves out completely. We know that God is always with us, so half the conversation partnership is already present. Ours is to respond and take up our part of the conversation.

I find I hear people a lot better when I’m listening. That is to say, if I’m attuned to Josiah rather than distracted by so many tasks or other voices that vie for my attention, I hear what he’s saying more clearly. He ceases to be a background noise or voice and I hear his words and his thoughts and his emotions that are behind those words and thoughts. And the same is true for anyone else in my life.

I think that’s what this list of characteristics is about. We choose to reflect on things that are lovely and good and true and suddenly those voices and those things that share those traits begin to move from the background to the foreground.

For some of us that means editing what we watch. The kind of TV shows we watch may be entertaining, but do they really help our thoughts and therefore our actions become more virtuous? Or do they cause us to think more darkly? Are they respectful of those who are portrayed? It may be what we choose to read or where we spend our time. And it’s not even that these things are necessarily bad in and of themselves, but perhaps they’re impacting us more than we think.

I remember a time in high school when I had become particularly sarcastic. I had a very quick wit and much of the time it was humorous. But one day I realized I was also able to use it disrespectfully. I had to reorient not just my words, but my thoughts. I had to choose to think differently so that I would speak differently.

Sometimes we don’t know why we find ourselves unable to stop singing Row, Row, Row Your Boat, but sometimes we can figure it out. We can go to the root of why our thoughts are not focused on those things that are praiseworthy. And then it’s within our ability, with God’s help, to make that change. To change the input so that our thoughts can be worthwhile and, in the end, that means pleasing to the One Who has made us. Amen.