Can Do

Psalm 100 Kimby Young

Philippians 4:4-13 July 17, 2016

So, this scripture passage continues the conversation from last week. But don’t worry, if you weren’t here last week, you won’t be lost. And just like last week, I invite you to open your Bibles to the scripture from Philippians to follow along as we do a little concrete Bible study – digging into these words from God for today. Now remember, Paul is writing from prison to his friends from the church he started in Philippi. Remember they had sent him an offering to help pay for his food and care while he was in prison, and this is Paul’s thank you note. So “from prison” Paul says – “Rejoice in the Lord always!” ALWAYS! Even from prison. So I can say – rejoice in the Lord. Have joy in all circumstances. I can say that easily. Because my life is pretty good. But when Paul says, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” When Paul says, “Rejoice in all circumstances,” then he is really saying something. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” All things. So in this passage, Paul shares that secret of being content in any situation. Paul spells out how it is that we can rejoice ALWAYS, how we can get through difficult times, how we can focus on Christ, and how we can be content whatever happens. It’s a lesson we all need to hear again and again.

I don’t know what you are experiencing now. I don’t know if, for you, life is pretty good, or life is awful. I don’t know if you are facing illness or loss or suffering – actually I know some of you are. We try to put a brave face on when we go out in public. We try to be positive. Even at church when someone says “how are you?” you respond, “fine, thank you” even if you are not fine. And I want to give you permission right now to set that aside. You can come honestly to this family of faith and share who you really are, what is really going on, how you really feel, even if you feel terrible, even if you don’t know what to do next. This church is a safe space to share your self – your true self – and to seek comfort or courage when you need it. And if you are not a public person and don’t want a lot of fuss – I understand that – but come talk to me one on one any time you need a listening ear. That’s what church is about – sharing our hearts and walking with one another along whatever road we walk – furthermore, knowing that God walks with you too – always, everywhere – God walks with you.

So when Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” he is not saying “pretend everything is fine.” He is not saying, “Ignore the bad and the difficult.” No, Suffering is real. And suffering is all around us. And Paul knows that suffering and faces it head on. Instead, Paul is saying here, find the joy that God is offering to you, even in the midst of sorrow or challenge. Find the joy. How do we do that? How do we find the joy? Paul’s formula. First, pray. Second, focus on Christ. And third, be confident in Christ. Trust God.

First, pray – as verse 6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” I love that this verse starts with “do not be anxious” because I need to hear that all the time. I worry too much and I come from a long line of worriers. Whenever I start with worry I get things backwards. If I have been worrying about something and I finally get around to praying about it, I always wonder what took me so long to pray. How can I forget how much it helps to give my worries to God? How can I forget that if I pray first, God will take it and resolve it, and I won’t waste so much time worrying? I know that I’m not alone in this silly cycle. I know several of you share the tendency to worry. So I think I should have this huge banner or billboard that says “Pray first”. Maybe that would remind me to get my priorities straight and give everything to God. So, that is Paul’s step one in finding the joy – in rejoicing in all circumstances. Pray first.

Second, focus on Christ. I like the way the Message Bible translates verse 8. It says, “You’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.” Look for what is honorable. Look for what is commendable. The old phrase is “look for the best; look for the silver lining.” But this is more than positive thinking. This kind of focus is not just looking for the BEST, but looking for THE best – that is looking for the ONE who is the best that can possibly be. Looking for God. Looking for and finding the presence of Christ in every circumstance. For Christ is there. Everywhere. God is ALWAYS HERE.

I know sometimes it is easier or more tempting to see the negative, to get trapped and pulled into negative thinking. It’s the worry thing again – I can imagine everything that might go wrong. But God invites us to reverse that – to imagine everything that could possibly go right, to imagine all that God can do to transform and revitalize. God invites us to imagine all that God can do. Imagine. Miracles are possible. God can do anything. See that. Look for that. Remember that. Expect that. Expect the best. Because that is what God promises to you. God promises abundance and security, prosperity and wholeness, comfort and care. God promises to turn darkness to light, to transform pain in to healing, to give life – even in the face of death. Believe God’s promises are for you. Believe. And receive God’s gift of amazing grace.

Which leads to Paul’s third point in this scripture passage, be confident in Christ. The verse, 13, says, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength” or the old translation – “through Christ who strengthens me.” This is a favorite verse to memorize, an inspiring verse to remember, a verse that motivates and pulls you forward in hope. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” You can indeed do all things – anything, everything. Because God is with you. God is for you. God gives you the strength or whatever you need, to not only make it through, but to thrive, to excel, to work miracles by God’s grace. God will make you able to do, whatever it is you need to do. God will give you whatever gifts and abilities you need, to do whatever it is you need to do. God will always be here for you. Always. And furthermore, God believes in you. God trusts you. God knows that you can make it through anything that happens. God knows that God can use you to bring about good in the world. God can use you to help someone else. God can use you to point others toward Christ. God can use you to accomplish whatever it is God intends to do in the world.

So for us as a church – what does it mean that “we can do all things through Christ”? Ah, this is the whole point of my sermon. This is the whole reason I selected these verses for today for this sermon series. You as a congregation have had some marvelous times. You have also been through some difficult times. You have quite literally walked through fire. You have struggled, you have lost some members, you have made some mistakes, you have faced some challenges. I believe Paul would say to you today – that difficulty is not where you live now. Listen to Paul’s advice… Pray first. Focus on God and good. And be confident in Christ. Trust God. God has great and wondrous plans for you. God has given you abundant gifts. God has shaped you, even thru these difficulties, so that you might be even better witnesses to God’s love in the world. Learn from the past, recognize your mistakes, but don’t stay there, because that is not where God calls you to be. God calls us to be transformed. God calls us to move forward in faith. God calls us to serve God well and faithfully here and now in this place and at this time. And God knows, you are up to the task. Miracles await. First Presbyterian Church of Gardner can be the best we have ever been. Because God can make it so. “Indeed, we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.” We can serve God because God makes us able to serve. So rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always! And let us give thanks to God as we serve God in the world.

Apostle’s Creed