

11-22-2020 CCI SERMON Philippians 4: 4-7 Nevertheless Thanks

There is a “Peanuts” cartoon in which Lucy asks Charlie Brown, “Did you ever know anyone who was really happy...” Before she can finish the question, Snoopy the dog comes dancing into the next frame. Snoopy dances and twirls happily with a huge smile while Lucy and Charlie watch in amazement. In the last frame Lucy finishes her question, “Did you ever know anyone who was really happy ... and was still in their right mind?”

We could ask that question of the Apostle Paul as he wrote today’s scripture reading. Rejoice? Was Paul in his right mind? Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians while he was sitting in prison for his faith in Jesus Christ. It wasn’t the first time he had been in prison, or beaten and left for dead, or shipwrecked, or gone hungry. He would likely spend the rest of his life in that prison. By the world’s standards of happiness, he should have been miserable.

Yet, Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!” Rejoice in prison? Paul wrote these words to a congregation that was under attack for their faith in Christ. Many of them had been deserted by friends, some had lost jobs so their families suffered. They had every right to be afraid and anxious. Yet Paul called them to rejoice. Rejoicing was so important that he said it twice, “Again I say rejoice!” Paul’s call to rejoice in spite of their circumstances was a call to say *Nevertheless*. “Yes, I have been rejected by my friends for my faith in Jesus. Yes, my family is suffering because of our faith. *Nevertheless*, I will rejoice because God is great faithful.” Rejoicing, or what I call *neverthelessing*, means in every situation we face, in spite of the unsettledness of the future or the present, in spite of what has happened or what may yet come, we choose to rejoice in God’s faithfulness and love.

Why can we rejoice in spite of what is happening, in spite of being treated unfairly, in spite of tragedy? Verse 5 tells us simply, the Lord is near. It is unclear whether Paul meant the Lord is near through the Spirit within us, or whether Paul meant that the Lord’s coming is near. Either way, we can choose to say, “Nevertheless!” in the face of tragedy, or pain, or danger, or unfairness, or opposition, and rejoice because the Lord is near.

On 9/11 in 2001 Todd Beamer sat on United Airlines flight 93 when the plane was hijacked and turned around in order to kills as many Americans as possible in an unknown location. Todd Beamer knew he and everyone on board were facing death on that plane. He joined a group of passengers and flight crew quietly plotting how to retake control of the plane. Then he called his wife Lisa on his cell phone to tell her what was happening, to tell her how much he loved her, and to say good-bye in case they were not successful. Someone spoke to him and the last words Lisa heard him say were, "Let's roll." We know what happened that day- those brave people did their best to retake the plane but in the struggle, the 757 lost control and crashed into the Shanksville, Pennsylvania countryside at 580 miles per hour killing everyone on board, but saving the lives of the hijackers' intended targets. Todd Beamer knew the power of nevertheless: "Lord, this task seems impossible, but nevertheless, I trust you. Whether we succeed or fail to get control of this plane, my life is in your hands." "Let's roll."

Rejoicing doesn't mean we will go around laughing or dancing like Snoopy, but it will affect our behavior. In verse 5 Paul says to let our "gentleness be known to all." Choosing to rejoice will make us gentle in our interactions with people. The Greek word we translate as gentleness isn't translated well by a single English word. Sometimes it is translated gentleness, benevolence, reasonableness, moderation. Aristotle defined the gentle person as "the one who by choice and habit does what is equitable, and who does not stand on his rights unduly, but is content to receive a smaller share although he has the law on his side." Can we hear a "Nevertheless" here? Even when I am right, and the law is on my side, "nevertheless," I will be reasonable, flexible, and even benevolent. Another writer describes gentleness as the opposite of being "stiff and bristly." Stiff and bristly people are hard to be around, they make everyone walk on egg shells. Paul says that rejoicing in the Lord allows us to be gentle and reasonable instead of bristly, even in tough situations.

In verse 6 choosing to rejoice leads to praying instead of being anxious or worrying. We all know what it means to worry- that tendency to mull over the same concern over and over, talking about it with this person and that person, fearing the worst thing that can happen. Acting as though God isn't capable of taking care of us without our help. Friends, it is impossible to trust God and worry at the same time. We can only do one or the other. Paul says that choosing to rejoice leads us to pray instead of

being anxious- to pray with thanksgiving even in the middle of trouble. To lift our concerns to the Lord because the Lord is near. Praying like Jesus in the garden, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” (Lk 22:42) Jesus modeled nevertheless in prayer. Imagine praying this way:

“Lord, I am so afraid as I face surgery. Nevertheless, Lord, I thank You for Your faithfulness to me in the past. You have always been near me, and I trust You to be near me now too. The fear of dying is strong, Lord, but nevertheless, I thank You that I can trust You with my future and I rejoice in being in your strong hands. Amen.”

What a difference nevertheless makes! Instead of just worrying out loud to the Lord and calling it prayer, we voice our concerns and then *leave them in his hands because we know the Lord is near*. Like Jesus, we begin to pray as much about being faithful and trusting God as we pray for what we want. Let’s pause a moment. What do **we** pray for? Do we pray for spiritual strength and integrity as much as we pray about problems? Do we get to the point of nevertheless the problems over to God’s faithfulness and leaving them there?

I watched two videos yesterday that touched me. One video was about a homeless man in Paris with a dog. He begged like the lepers in last Sunday’s scripture reading. A young business man saw this homeless man everyday on his way to work, saw him smiling everyday when everyone else he knew was seldom happy. One day he took the day off, bought a blanket, food for the man and the dog and sat down on the sidewalk to eat together and hear his story. Several months earlier, the homeless man had wondered why he was still alive because he had nothing to live for, no hope, no possibilities of change. On the day he stood on a bridge getting his courage up to jump to his death, this dog showed up needing something to eat. He finally had something to live for, and someone to love and be loved by. He told the businessman that he had never received that kind of love from a human. Because of that dog, he had joy every day in spite of being destitute. I cried at the thought that his dog showed him more Christlike love than humans. I prayed we could be people who show Christ’s love as well as a dog.

The second video was of a 10-year-old boy born with autism and completely blind, born to a mother addicted to drugs. He was placed in foster care until his uncle took him into his family. In the video, the young man moved constantly, and needed his white-tipped walking stick. He

stood in front of a huge church and sang in a strong, yet angelic, voice, the song Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord. Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, I want to see you, I want to see You high and lifted up. He wasn't singing about healing of his blindness, he was asking God to open the eyes of his heart, to keep him focused on Jesus. In spite of all he faced, he sang with a heart full of joy. I cried again and wanted to be like him.

Choosing to rejoice means making room in our prayers for God to change us as much as change our circumstances, maybe even instead of changing our circumstances. When we let go of our expectations for what God has to do in order to answer our prayers right, what comes is a peace that passes understanding, a peace that can't be understood by looking at our circumstances, just by looking at God. A peace that remains when there are no quick or easy answers. A peace that remains when the world around us is out of our control, when the wait is long, or the loss is deep. It's the peace we long for in tough times - peace in the storm that guards our hearts and minds from the worrying that steals our peace and joy and tempts us to give up. I pray this peace for each of us as we head into our different Thanksgivings, that we can lift sincere thanks in spite of the storm around us. That we can say, "Nevertheless, Lord, You are faithful and I will rejoice."