

St. Brendan's
 Oct 11, 2026
 Philippians 4:1-9
 Emily Blair Stribling

I will not be preaching on today's gospel passage. There are some hard lessons in Scripture, and this parable is one of them. I've always liked what my New Testament professor, Sharon Ringe, said about the parable.... that is, you wouldn't go to a royal wedding in your blue jeans because it doesn't show much respect for the occasion. Or to put it more succinctly, actions speak louder than words.

So today let us consider Paul's letter to the Philippians. I confess it is one of my favorite pieces of Scripture now, but that was not always the case. Honestly, it used to irk me that Paul was so cheerful, so hopeful, so trusting when the world he lived in was not so different than ours today. Poverty, discord and conflict were rampant. Citizens of the ancient world were oppressed by the Roman empire on all sides. In fact, Paul was writing this letter from a Roman prison. He'd been threatened, rejected, beaten. He was awaiting trial and perhaps facing death. How is it he can speak of peace and joy?

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice?"

Those are questions I kept asking myself every time this passage came up over the years. But then one day by the grace of God I noticed something that would change my life. For the first time rather than asking what there was to rejoice in, something else struck. Paul had singled out two women in the first part of this passage, Euodia and Syntyche and it dawned on me this must mean they both played a significant role in the Philippian Church... *"And I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel..."* Paul wanted these two to reconcile whatever differences they had so they could continue their ministry. I remember being astonished that women had any role whatsoever in the ancient church.

What you need to know is that I grew up in an Episcopal culture in Washington DC and there was not a single clergy woman in any of the churches in the area. In fact, it wasn't until 1976 that the General convention of the Episcopal church formally recognized the ordination of women priests. My husband, Robert's aunt, Ann Stribling, was told in the early 1970's three times to go home and take care of her three sons rather than be ordained. She persisted and finally was ordained in the early 80's but it was still an uphill battle!

Reading this passage was the first time in my life that I had ever considered I too might be invited to have a voice in the Episcopal Church. It would be many years still before I was considered for ordination, but it was this passage that opened me to the possibility that God in fact might be calling me to serve the church.

And it was after this, that I began to understand that Paul's peace and joy were not the result of some pervasive feeling of giddy happiness but the result of his personal encounter with the love of God in Jesus on that road to Damascus.

We all know the story. Paul was traveling on the road to Damascus to arrest some of Jesus' followers. Blinded by a flash of light from heaven that knocked him to the ground, he heard "*Paul, Paul why do you persecute me?*" When he asked who was speaking, he heard, "*I am Jesus who you are persecuting.*" Eventually his sight returned and he was baptized and began proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah.

The source of Paul's peace and joy flowed out of this encounter and was sustained by Paul's practice of prayer and contemplation, the fruits of his spiritual life.

He says, "*The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God.*" I believe he could only have claimed God is there for us if he had experienced God's moving in his own life. So rather than think of Paul so full of cheer, I began to think of him as full of God's love...that is to say, Paul understood through Christ's saving life, death and resurrection, God offers all of us, all creation, a way towards peace and joy.

"Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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." And I say to you try it, try it, just once. Whatever darkness, whatever danger, whatever difficulty, Paul's words and his trust in God have the power to move us from despair to hope. Now whenever I lose my way, I read this passage to regain my balance.

Recently I came across some fascinating research that neuroscientists have done regarding the brain. Dr. Lee C. Warren uses Philippians 4:8 as an operational instruction manual (his words, not mine) for neuroplasticity. He has found that directing one's attention towards gratitude and goodness actually triggers changes in the brain.

The Italian mystic known as Padre Pio puts it all simply "Pray, hope, don't worry." This was Paul's practice in a nutshell, isn't it. I am convinced that Paul couldn't have written these words in his letter to the Philippians if he hadn't personally experienced the love of God in Jesus Christ. He chose to fill himself up with God's love so that there was no space left for worry. Paul handed that off to God, something we can do also if we choose to...

Perhaps some of you may know I spent two summers on the Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners area. I was working on a project with the State University of Utah in Logan, Utah to support those Navajo who were raising native churro sheep who provide the wool for those beautiful Navajo rugs. Among the many wonderful things, the Navajo taught me is how important harmony and balance is to their culture. During transitions or in times of trouble, they have a traditional chant they use to restore balance to the body, mind and spirit. I also believe this chant echoes most of what Paul is getting at in this Philippians passage.

A Navajo Prayer

In beauty may I walk
 All day long may I walk
 Through the returning seasons may I walk
 Beautifully will I possess again
 Beautifully birds
 Beautifully joyful birds
 On the trail marked with pollen may I walk
 With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk
 With dew about my feet may I walk
 With beauty may I walk
 With beauty before me may I walk
 With beauty behind me may I walk
 With beauty above me may I walk
 In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty, lively may I walk
 In old age, wandering on a trail of beauty living again, may I walk
 It is finished in beauty.
 It is finished in beauty.

It doesn't matter that our language differs...at the heart of this chant is a call to feel grateful...to recognize the beauty that is all around us and to share it with the other.

It is a prayer for balance and harmony just as Paul's letter to the Philippians wants us to trust that balance and harmony is available to us if we will open ourselves to the love of God that surrounds us.

Let me end with the words of poet and musician Chris Van Cleave:

*"Mystery Healer, I feel your hand above my brow
 Into your love I bow."*

Amen

