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Philippians 4:6-9 Enemies of Gratitude: Worry
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Philippians 4:6-9

New Revised Standard Version

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 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. 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.

We're talking for the next few weeks about those things that keep us from being truly grateful. That is, those enemies of gratitude that prevent us from seeing all the blessings that are right in front of us. Today we hear Paul's words to the people in Philippi, "Do not worry about anything." It sounds simple enough, but this may be the most difficult of all biblical instructions to keep. Worry is an unwelcome guest in human hearts. Anyone else struggle with this? I am a worrier. I always think of the worst-case scenario, just to be prepared, you know. The Apostle Paul had plenty to worry about. He is writing this letter in chains, as he sits on death row. He was scheduled to be executed for preaching the Gospel. His body has been beaten, he has been stoned almost to death, he has endured shipwrecks and angry mobs, and now he will die for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With all of that going on in his own life, he says, "Rejoice." In case the first time didn't take, he says it again, "Again, I say, rejoice." It's almost as if Paul is saying celebrate your way through the chaos. Earlier in this letter, Paul, sitting in prison says, "I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance."

All around Paul, the church is being assaulted, the apostles are being persecuted, families are being torn apart, and fear is reigning in the hearts of the believers. Even as Paul faces his own death his message is simple, don't worry, but rejoice.

The powerful thing about Paul's instruction is how incongruent it is with what is going on in his life and all around him. Paul doesn't say be joyful, because things are going well. For Paul, nothing is going well. Paul doesn't say rejoice in your family, or in your job, or in your well-being, or in the fact that you live free from all dangers. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord."

Some of us hear "do not worry about anything", and it just makes us worry more, because we worry too much, and now we're worried that we're too worried. But this isn't a psychological trick. Paul isn't telling us to think happy thoughts. Paul has seen up close and personal the pain of this world, the darkness of this world. He is just as overwhelmed by the evil that grips God's creation, but he believes in another story.

Paul says that God's peace passes all understanding. Paul says that it makes no sense. It's not something you think your way into; it's not something you arrive at logically; God's peace is something you trust in. When we have that peace, God will guard our hearts. The word Paul uses is a military word, like a sentry watchman. The God of the universe will stand watch over your heart and protect it from whatever the world can throw at you.

When you're worried about something, it is not helpful when a well-meaning person tells you, "Don't worry so much about it. I'm sure it will be fine." My internal voice replies, "Gee, thanks." That doesn't solve it. We don't stop worrying just because someone told us not to. Letting go of our worry is not a matter of ignoring what's wrong; it's a confidence in what is

right. It's dropping anchor in the good news of Christ Jesus rather than waiting for the news of the world to calm us down.¹

We know that worrying isn't useful, we know that worrying isn't the response of faith and trust that we want to have. But, we worry, and then we feel shame because we worry. Brene Brown says that is a shame spiral. Not worrying isn't about having more faith. Letting go of worry isn't about reducing stress but about increasing trust. I wonder if instead of feeling shame when we worry, we can feel God's grace and love. Instead of feeling like fingers are pointed at us, we can feel nourished. Don't worry, but rejoice because God cares for you and God cares for this world. God will stop at nothing to hold us, and hold this world in God's own arms sustaining us with God's presence, God's Spirit, God's life-giving breath.

We are going to worry, but when we do, we can breathe in hope and joy. We can feel God's reassurance of love for us. We can choose to trust in God's love for us, freeing us from the stranglehold of worry. Paul says in Romans 8, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I learned something new this week. Did you know that "strangle" is the literal meaning of the verb worry? Worry comes from the Old English *wyrgran* which meant strangle. When life has got us in a stranglehold, when we feel life has got us by the throat, that feeling should alert us that we might be allowing worry to hold too much power. We have let worry be the dominant voice in our lives rather than God. I know that there is a so much to worry about these days. Worry has a loud voice in our imagination, but we can let God loosen worry's grip in our lives.

Years ago I was sharing with a friend about how I worry and she told me a story about a handyman. He had finished his work for the day, and when he went out to his truck he had a flat tire and his truck wouldn't start. He got a ride home from the homeowner and the handyman seemed discouraged. As the handyman walked toward the front door of the house, he stopped at a small tree, and he touched the tips of the branches with both hands. The homeowner wasn't sure what that was about, but he noticed that after the handyman did it, he walked taller. His children rushed out to greet him and the handyman was all smiles as he waved goodbye to the homeowner. The next day the homeowner asked the handyman about that tree. Was it a special tree? The homeowner was wondering why the handyman had touched it and why after he touched it, he seemed different? The handyman said, "Oh, that's my trouble tree. I know I can't help having troubles in my day, but they don't belong in my home with my family. I hang them up on that tree every night when I come home and I ask God to take care of them. Then, in the morning I pick them up again. Funny thing is, when I come out in the morning to pick them up, there aren't nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before."

I think about that trouble tree a lot as a way to give my worries over to God. I also have written my prayers out and put them in a prayer bag with God's name on it. I then taped that bag high up on a door. I had written down all of the concerns and worries of my heart and put them on pieces of paper in that bag. The rule is that if I start worrying about something that is in that bag that I have given over to God, I have to get a chair, climb up, and pull out that slip of paper from the bag. That's a lot of trouble, and it helps me remember to give my worries over to God.

I know that when I take care of myself, when I eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep, I worry less. I love the end of this passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is

¹ A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 68.

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.” I know what to do, I know how to choose trust, and every day I have to do it. Amen.