**Coronado Community Church**

*Thinking Well*

Philippians 4: 4-9

A message by Pastor Eric Smith

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Do you ever talk to yourself? Of course you do. I do, too. I usually don’t do it out loud; but I do it all of the time. I carry on running conversations with myself.

When I am in the midst of thinking about a sermon Karen will sometimes point out to me that I am being animated in my silence... shaking my head, furrowing a brow, grimacing, acknowledging a good point. If I’m really into it I start gesturing, too.

My family mocks me.

But I always make sense to myself. I know you do, too.

I mentioned this concept to you a couple of weeks ago. I raise it again as an introduction to the theme I found in our scripture passage.

*We always make sense to ourselves* – and knowing the truth of that… *we want to be thinking well.*

The Apostle Paul wanted those early Christians to be thinking well. To grasp the concept and to practice it. He illustrated this using several key concepts in our reading, and the message today lifts out those key concepts so that we can *think well…* using them together.

When Paul wrote this letter he was in prison.

I’ve spent time in prison – I was involved in the Kairos Prison ministry. Part of that ministry is about putting on spiritual retreats for inmates – held inside the prison. Whether you are an inmate or a visitor, going into prison is a sobering and impacting experience. As a volunteer inside I had to sign a form that said I understood that there would be no negotiation for hostages – that got my attention. Lots of concrete… steel… barbed wire… guns… and dangerous people.

Paul was in prison and I suspect that prison conditions of his day wouldn’t compare well with prison life today. Paul had something to say about his circumstances…

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

I thought I knew what joy is. I thought it was obvious… everyone knows what joy is… until I started working with the concept. We know what joy is because we experience it – but when we try to describe *what it is* with words they are not quick to come.

A definition: *feelings of great happiness or pleasure especially of an elevated or spiritual kind.*

Frederick Buechner wrote: *Happiness turns up more or less where you’d expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.*

The great theologian Paul Tillich said: *only the fulfillment of what we really are can give us joy. Joy is nothing else than the awareness of our being fulfilled in our true being, in our personal center.*

Behind both of these statements is a premise. We are fulfilled in relationship with God… that we discover who we really are in connecting with God. When we do that, we find joy.

Joy has a special place in faith. Next week we begin the church’s season of Advent… the prophets will rejoice in anticipation of the birth of the messiah… the message of the angels will be Rejoice! … All the characters of our nativity scenes will share the joy of this birth.

Joy is at the core of our faith.

**Here is the next verse…**

*5Let your gentleness be known to everyone.*

Let’s do a little digging into this one.

Remember that the Bible wasn’t written in English. Paul wrote his letters in Greek. I decided to see if he really used this word… *gentleness* … is it a straight across translation of the word that Paul used? … or maybe not?

Translators have choices in what words they use… they are essentially editors of the Bible. They decided the meaning we will take from their translation. As they translate they find some straight across meanings of words between different languages – but mostly not. And even when that happens, the meaning of a word in our own language may be obscure for us, or not clear in conveying the ideas of the writer in his own language, or sometimes it’s just not elegant enough.

So gentleness …the word, more accurately is, *forbearance.*

*Let your forbearance be known to everyone.*

And what does that mean?

**Forbearance is**a refraining from the enforcement of something that is due… like a debt or an obligation. The act of forbearing means being patient.

Charles Dickens, in his book titled, Barnaby Rudge, put the meaning into the words of one of his characters who was sharing some wisdom of life…

*Mrs Varden …entreated her (friend) to remember that …*

*marriage … was a state requiring great fortitude and forbearance.*

*Let your forbearance be known to everyone* means that you let things go. We practice releasing our requiring payment of any of the sorts of things that put us in a power position in relationship to others. We let go of social or familial debts. Like requiring an apology… or requiring deference, or putting on airs that make others feel insecure around us. The practice of this kind of forbearance is gentleness in relationship. By choice, you put yourself on a level playing field with everyone… even when they are not worthy or deserving of it.

We are to be forbearing people.

The next practice begins with a caution… don’t worry. Some of us are better at not worrying than others. Some of us are obsessive worriers.

Mahatma Gandhi was not one to mince words. He commented about worry this way…

*There is nothing that wastes the body like worry,*

*and one who has any faith in God*

*should be ashamed to worry about anything whatsoever.*

The Apostle Paul’s *caution* about worry is accompanied with *the cure* for it… which is *prayer with thanksgiving*.

You know this works. Too simple. You cannot worry while you are being thankful. Those two things just won’t go together. You have to stop one to do the other.

Here’s something …

I have performed a lot of weddings. Prior to their wedding I meet with the couple and we talk together – sometimes one meeting, sometimes more. There was this couple who wanted me to perform their wedding. So we got to talking and I asked them to tell me their story.

Well … it was complex… most of our stories are… both of them had been married before. She had been in an abusive relationship and had hidden herself in drugs and alcohol. She overdosed but survived.

He had been into drugs and alcohol before he had gotten married the first time, but didn’t stop using. Then he lost a child in a tragic manner. He drowned in the bathtub.

Independently they got into 12 step programs and their lives began to transform. Then they found each other. But life was not smooth.

One day they were driving down the highway in his truck which needed $500 worth of repair and they didn’t have the money … it was raining out… her best friend was in the hospital… he had just been laid off… the rent was due… on and on… they were miserable.

But they were people who believed in a higher power. And as they were whining and complaining to each other on a crummy night in their crummy truck about their crummy lives there was a lull in their conversation. And something hit them both at the same moment, an epiphany.

He turned to her – she looked at him - and he said, “honey… we’re not being grateful.” Then they started laughing. Big laughing. Crying laughing.

They told me, that moment changed their lives.

You can’t be worried and grateful at the same time.

Our lives are a series of scenes in a larger production called “My Life” and they are not all easy or happy scenes:

You may be perpetually dealing with a really difficult relationship with someone.

You may be in a difficult season of your life – we all have them…

But… we are alive… we have been given this gift. We’re only alive for a certain amount of time, and then we’re done. So it’s good to be grateful on *any* day. It’s good to be grateful on *every* day. Because, as Paul continued, when you’re not worrying, you get the peace…

*which surpasses understanding,*

*and guards your hearts and your minds*

Paul was trained as, what we could call, a theological attorney. He took a position. He stated his case. He argued against the opposing view. Then he summed it all up. The Apostle does this over and over again in his letters.

In this argument we’ve titled, Think Well, Paul has a summary statement to wrap it all up.

He wrote…

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.*

That… is thinking well.