

We don't normally read Philippians 4 with strife and chaos in the community in mind. However, in today's world – like that of the Early Church – we really need to hear the message Paul sent. Not just because there is conflict within the community, but because of the effects disharmony has on the strength and purpose of a community.

Today, as we delve into the wisdom of Philippians, we find that this ancient letter addresses a situation quite like the village's strife story. This is not normally the way we view Philippians 4.

Jane Lancaster Patterson writes, “The beautiful, poetic language of Philippians 4:4-9 has become a familiar touchstone for many. But if this passage is separated from the conditions in which the words were first offered as consolation, the meaning can become a shallow assurance of God's answers to prayer.”¹

Paul's letter to the Philippians was sent at a time when the community was going through tough social and economic times. Both Paul and the Philippians were under a lot of pressure to stop talking about their belief in a crucified and risen Messiah. He wrote these words while imprisoned in a Roman jail for preaching and teaching that God's love is for Everybody – thus he was a threat to the socio-political framework of the empire.

Paul was concerned about giving hope and practical advice to his beloved community. His letter reflects his desire for the Philippians to find, through the Christ, joy and peace, and unity in community.

Knowing this background – and his passion for this community, we can see that Paul's words were not some trivial blathering. He was serious about his encouragement to the Philippians. He wanted them to be strong in the LORD so that, after he was killed, when they would be without his encouragement and instruction, then they would still work together as community because they were given all the tools they would need.

Knowing this context of the letter – as one of encouragement sent near the time of his death, we can better understand the passion and the intent of Paul's letter.

However, before we get into the meat of the sermon today, I have some thoughts chapters and verses. Chapters and verses were not original to the Bible – in fact, centuries after the books of the Bible were compiled and formed into what we now know as the Bible, Robert Estienne, a Parisian printer, included them in the printing of his Greek New Testament in 1551. 4 years later he published the first full Bible with verse and chapter divisions. In 1560 the first English Bible – the Geneva Bible was translated from the Latin and published by Calvinist leaning reformists. This English Bible translation was later banned in 1616 when King James found that HIS translation wasn't selling as well as the Geneva Bible

Paul didn't use chapters and verses when he wrote the letter to the Philippians, nor did he use them in any of his other letters. When we read the epistles, we can easily read them out of context because of chapter and verses. When we look closely at our text today, we see that I've combined two chapters. This is because it sets the context of our main text – which is Philippians 4:2-9

¹ Patterson, Jane Lancaster. “Commentary on Philippians 4:1-9.” Working Preacher , October 6, 2023.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-6>.

So, context. Let's begin with Philippians 3:14-4:1

¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.

¹⁶ Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

¹⁸ For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ;

I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly;

and their glory is in their shame;

their minds are set on earthly things.

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

The temptations of the world culture surround the congregation in Philippi – temptations to live for their present satisfaction - consuming everything to overindulgence. Paul reminds the Philippian church to resist the temptations and to stand firm in what they have come to know through Paul about Christ. Paul ended this section in Philippians 4:1 as a summary of what was just mentioned as well as a starting point for what was to come. Everything Paul wrote to the Philippians following this verse was based on this strong bond of love and respect that they shared.

The success of the Philippian congregation was a source of joy for Paul because the community was a living example of the Gospel in action. That's why Paul called them the "crown" of his ministry. They support him financially and even took risks to help him during his time in prison. From this place of love, Paul addressed an issue about the congregation that had really been bothering him – the conflict between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. These two had worked together with Paul and Clement and the rest of Christ's followers in Philippi.

Paul wrote:

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,

help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In simple terms, verse 2 and 3 reminded the readers – then and today- to put aside petty disagreements – especially when all parties involved were working toward the same goal – which was thinking and living like Christ.

Thinking like Christ means showing love and kindness to everyone in the community – but especially for those who are struggling, less powerful or oppressed, just like Jesus did.

Like in when I talked about the gardeners who had a disagreement and, in turn, the whole garden failed, so too, Euodia and Syntyche's disagreement threatened the fabric holding the community together.

Paul asked other leaders to help them come together – if not in total agreement, then at least to realize that they shared the same purpose - to live and love in the same mind as Christ. To have the same mind as Christ is to not EVER stop trying to make things right. Christ calls us to forgive – 70x7 times – and to leave the resulting judgement to God who is merciful and is the ultimate judge of us all.

I was reminded, last Sunday, that we – as Christ's followers – bring many gifts of the Spirit together. God uses ALL the gifts of the congregation for God's purposes of bringing Shalom – wholeness. When we devalue the character of another in our congregation, we are devaluing the work of the Spirit of God within that person. The wind of the Spirit blows where it pleases – and often in places we don't choose ourselves.

Who are we to say that the gift of administration or the gift of prophecy or the gift of economic support or teaching, or nurturing life, or singing, or creative arts, or remembering historical events and traditions, or stoic calmness, or messy joy cannot be used together to create a wonderful and dynamically beautiful body that lives and is shaped by the mind of Christ?

It's at this point in the letter that Paul wrote the now famous phrases. When I read them in light of the conflict between Syntyche and Euodia, they read with so much more meaning.

What if we read the following verses as encouraging directions on how to live with daily conflict? What if these words were written for those who were working with the two women – and as an encouragement to those two women who disagreed with each other?

Instead of reminding them that God's vengeance was near, Paul said,

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not worry about anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

If we read these verses while considering the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche, then we find that what Paul really said was that "GOD's got this!"

God's got you. God understands when things in a relationship don't go as planned. God's got you when it seems as though your sister and brother don't understand you or appreciate you. Find joy in the plans that God has for you and for the other person.

Rejoice in the LORD always! Remember, everyone has moments when they're not at their best. Instead of acting out in anger or spite, let your gentleness be known to everyone.

God's got you! The LORD is NEAR. Take some time to realize that you're surrounded by God's love, which is bigger and deeper than anything else.

Don't let your worry over the relationship or your anger at the other person consume you. With every situation or times of meeting, or disagreeing with the other person, pray your requests to God. Your prayers of vengeance, or anxiety, or anger, or fear, or frustration are all acceptable to God. Take special note of things to rejoice in. No prayer is too shallow or trite. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul closed this conversation with a reminder to focus on the important things. He said:

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

Paul reminded the women and the whole congregation to focus on what was important and not get too caught up in all that was going wrong, the problems, and the bad things happening in the world. Instead, he encouraged them to pay attention to when people did good things. To observe where God's justice was happening, and to note where and when kindness was given.

What we have translated as "think about these things" Paul literally said, "tally up these things! Make a list of all the wonderful things that you see happening in the community, in the congregation and within the life and actions of the one with whom you disagree. Make a list! Write it down! Praise God for what you see!

Paul's letter to the Philippians was a reminder to let God's love into the conflict so that the congregation could stay focused on their shared task in the garden.

Paul's message to us, through the Philippian congregation, is also a reminder to invite God's love into our troubles, pain, conflicts, and disagreements with each other. It reminds us that God is with us, and our work in God's kingdom is more important than our minor differences.

Our work in God's kingdom can only succeed when every part of the community works together, using our God-given gifts. It's not about living in unity, but about living in harmony, where every individual note only finds its full meaning when sung together with all the others.