

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – October 11, 2020
Reflecting on Our Past and Envisioning Our Future
1 Thessalonians 1:1-6a and Philippians 4:1-9

Leaders are able “by words or deeds to polarize the congregation, destroying the one soul, one mind, one body.”¹ In Philippians, Paul addresses the existence of conflict directly “because he expects the church to help with the healing.”² He reminds us that “being members of one another means laying before each other joys, sorrows, and burdens,” yes, “but also issues to be settled.”³

Ultimately, Paul’s hope for the Philippians, and Paul’s hope for us is peace. Peace, in this sense, is not merely the absence of conflict. Not just the enduring hope that people will lay down the weapons they use to hurt their neighbors in mind, in body, or in spirit. No. Peace as Paul intends it is the desire and pursuit of total well-being. Such peace does not come from within. Rather, it is a gift from God “to those who are in Christ Jesus and who share his attitude, so that his ‘heart and mind’ become theirs.”⁴

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 70.

² Craddock, 70.

³ Craddock, 70.

⁴ Morna D. Hooker, *Philippians, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck, (Abingdon Press, 2000), 541.

We have all been aggrieved. And at some point along the way, we have likely wrestled with the concept of forgiveness, asking, “But, why should we forgive? I mean, he never even asked for forgiveness.” When it comes to our pain which is too deep for words, I am right there with you. I recognize that one of the most difficult things that we will ever do in our lifetimes is to enter into our pain and to seek to be at peace.

I know that the wounds which seek to ensnare us are both old and new, obvious and hidden, fiercely guarded and repeatedly encountered. None of us is finally exempt from pain. Yet, the consequences of our pain can be destructive. Pain disrupts our witness. It impedes our happiness. It injures our health. And it damages our relationships by muffling our attempts at reconciliation with our past, with our family, and with our neighbors.

This is why it can be so helpful to engage in periods of sustained reflection, to admit our shortcomings, and to hear the voices of others who cry out in lament. By engaging in these practices, we retain our integrity as the people of God. What Paul urges is not that the church will avoid entering into its pain. Rather, Paul encourages the church not be victimized by its problems.⁵ For whether those

⁵ Craddock, 71.

challenges exist within the body or whether those problems are present beyond our walls, we are called to lean into the joy and gentleness that our faith makes possible, as a means of liberating us from anxiety.⁶

I invite you to think about that for a moment. This idea of leaning into the joy and gentleness that our faith makes possible, as a means of liberating us from anxiety. What do you suppose this looks like? If you were to pause and think about one of the most faithful people you know. And, specifically, if you were to pause and think about the qualities that person embodies. What would you say?

Is his or her life filled with attempts at getting even, and settling scores, and holding grudges? Does that individual go through life with clenched fists, eager to engage in conflict, and filled with anxiety? Or is the exemplar that you have imagined comfortable with kindness, persistent in generosity, and humble in heart? I wonder.

Carol Dempsey describes our shared life in Christ in the following way. It is “finding joy in one’s relationship with God; avoiding unnecessary worry, which implies having trust in God’s goodness and care; being engaged in active prayer,

⁶ Craddock, 71.

whereby one's needs are made known to God; and living a life of virtue that has gentleness as its cornerstone. The reward for living this type of life is the peace of God.”⁷

I am grateful that, in the life of this community, faithful people have demonstrated these virtues for us. They have served as our models, our mentors, our teachers, and our partners in practice. They have engaged deeply in the teachings of Jesus, have shown us what Christian practices require of us, and have included us in lives dedicated to service.

These guides have explained to us what these Christian practices mean, and they have described the value embedded in them. Finally, they have pressed us beyond our current understandings of faithfulness to the point where we might deepen the practices themselves.⁸ And they have done all of this while rooted in scripture's teachings and Jesus' proclamation that “I have come that they may have life, and life abundantly.”

⁷ Carol J. Dempsey, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 382.

⁸ Dykstra, Craig. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. Pg. 73.

Friends, is it possible to pursue abundant life in the midst of our shortcomings, in the midst of our hurts, and in the midst of a global pandemic? Or must abundant life wait for a more convenient time when we are less distracted, and less angry, and more receptive to Christ's call for peace? From my own experience as a minister, we rarely feel compelled to voluntarily step into our pain and remember past grievances. This is difficult and trying work. And yet, doing so is an opportunity to practice our faith and to embody the life to which Christ has called us.

To live at peace in the present, and to envision a more hopeful future is to yearn for that abundance which Christ makes possible. Therefore, both as individuals and, collectively, as people of God, we strive for what lies ahead until we, too, might be called exemplars of the faith. Practitioners of gospel love set aside for the building up of the one body of Christ. May God guide our attempts at healing, and may God help us to celebrate our present journey of discipleship, confident in purpose, and assured of God's goodness now and forevermore. Amen.