

No Matter What: Focus

Philippians 4:2-7

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Arlys was the matriarch of her family. She was the glue that held all things together, the keeper of stories and the architect of the family traditions. And so, it's no wonder that every member of her rather large family came from every corner of the country to celebrate her life when she died. Arlys died peacefully, but with one great regret. Her two brothers, Sid and Andy, hadn't spoken to one another in years. In fact, it had been so long that no one could remember what precipitated the argument they had. They just knew that Sid and Andy hadn't been in the same room together in a long time. But that was about to change.

At the funeral, both men sat in the front row of the church, their posture as stiff as their starched shirts. Not a word passed between them. The luncheon afterward was held at the Eagle's Club. As the kegs emptied, the room filled with stories of Arlys and her life. Suddenly an anxious hush fell over the room as the family watched Sid and Andy walk out the sliding glass doors together and onto the patio. It was as if everyone in the room had forgotten how to breathe, half expecting these two men, both well into their 70's, to throw punches. Words were exchanged, though no one could hear them. And then, in a moment that seemed to happen in slow motion, Sid and Andy embraced and wept in each other's arm. New kegs were tapped, and more stories flowed. But the one that everyone really wanted to hear was the story of what happened out on that patio. "Well," said Andy, his arm around his brother, "We both realized today that we'd been looking at things all wrong. Life isn't about being right. It's about loving well. Arlys taught us that, but I guess we forget. We're not gonna forget again."

St. Paul could have written those words, "Life isn't about being right. It's about loving well." In fact, he says something very much like that in today's scripture reading as we conclude our series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. If you've been following along in this series, you'll know that the unity of the body of Christ has been one of Paul's primary themes. And in today's reading we catch one of the

reasons why. Let's pick up Paul's letter with chapter 4, verses 2 and 3,

Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement. And I ask you, my true partner, to help these two women, for they worked hard with me in telling others the Good News. They worked along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life.

There's a lot we don't know about this passage. We don't know who Euodia and Syntyche are. We don't know what they were fighting about. We don't know who the "true partner" was whom Paul asks to help these two women settle their argument. Here's what we do know – two beloved children of God were at odds with one another, and their conflict was disturbing the community, hindering their witness, and breaking Paul's heart.

I am beyond grateful that our three boys get along so well with one another, because I have known and worked with many families in which broken relationships broke hearts. Paul, who thought of himself as a kind of spiritual father to this community, felt that pain knowing that Euodia and Syntyche were at odds – enough to call them out publicly. And notice what Paul does. He doesn't try to settle their dispute by delving into who was right and who was wrong. He called them to something greater. He called them to restore their relationship because they belong to the Lord.

If you take a business trip representing the company you work for, you behave in a way that reflects the company's values. If you're the ambassador from the United States to a foreign country, you behave in a way that reflect our country's values. And when you've been baptized into Christ, you behave in a way that reflects God's Kingdom values – values like humility, forgiveness, grace and love. You value loving well over being right. Paul was reminding Euodia and Syntyche who they were in Christ, and then he called them to live out of that identity.

Have you got a squabble going on with someone? A grudge you're holding onto? Is it important to you to be right, so much so that you're willing to sacrifice love? Let's these words from Paul remind you of who you are, and let your identity as a child of God compel you to value loving well over being right.

Let's continue with verses 4 through 7. Paul writes, *Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*

Paul is now in the home stretch of his letter and as he so often does Paul closes with a rapid-fire list of brief instructions. We might think about these instructions as Paul expanding upon what it means to live "in the Lord", even when you're undergoing difficult circumstances.

First, Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice. What's interesting about the word in the original Greek is that it was a communal activity. In other words, Paul was calling the Philippians to come together, perhaps in the context of corporate worship, and celebrate God's goodness. Even in difficult circumstances there is always reason to rejoice, and you just can't rejoice and complain at the same time!

Second, Paul calls the Philippians to be considerate. The Greek word that Paul uses here was often used to describe an attitude of kindness and gentleness when the normal or expected response was retaliation.

Third, Paul calls the Philippians to choose prayer over worry. Now, let's be clear. Paul knew nothing about crippling, clinical anxiety. So, I would never say to someone that they should just pray their clinical anxiety away any more than I would tell someone to just pray their cancer away instead of seeking medical care. But those of us who struggle with occasional garden variety worry, Paul encourages us to pray. Some of us seem to labor under the illusion that by worrying we can somehow control a situation that is out of our control. But prayer is the practice of entrusting those situations to God.

1 Peter puts it this way, *"Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you."* And the result, according to Paul, is peace. I don't how that works; I just know that so often it does. I find that, more often than not, when I pray my circumstances don't change, but I do. And peace is often the result.

Let's finish with verses 8-9. Paul writes, *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*

Have you ever noticed that when you're in conflict with someone you're usually focused on how right you are and wrong the other person is...which only perpetuates the conflict? And when you're drowning in worry you're focused on what might happen in the future that you can't control...which only increases your anxiety? What we focus on matters. It profoundly impacts how we experience life and how we respond to it. That's why Paul concludes this section with some thoughts on the Philippians' focus. And what he lists – what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and admirable – are all Kingdom virtues. Focus on those things and you are more likely to act truthfully, honorably, rightly, purely, lovingly and admirably.

One of the first skills that a cyclist needs to learn is how to drink from a water bottle while still pedaling down the road. It sounds simple, but you quickly realize that where your eyes go, so does your bike. So, if you turn your head to drink out of your water bottle, you have a tendency to run off the road.

Same thing is true in life. Focus your thoughts on your worries or your conflicts, you're going to ride off the road of peace and harmony. And we all do. We all find ourselves caught up in worry or rehearsing our conflicts from time to time. And when we do Paul encourages us to re-center ourselves by focusing on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and admirable.

We don't know if Euodia and Syntyche ever resolved their conflict, but I do know that Andy and Sid never forgot the lesson they learned on the day of Arlys' funeral. And how about you? Are you holding a grudge, focused on being right?

Let me be clear. There are relationships that are so toxic, so emotionally unsafe, that seeking reconciliation is neither wise nor healthy. It's good to talk to a professional counselor if you think that describes a relationship in your life.

Today I'm talking about those relationships in which, if we're really honest, we're more interested in being right than in being in a right relationship. Maybe, like Andy and Sid, it's a long-time feud with a friend or family member. Or maybe you're worked up about the recent election results and those who voted differently than you did. Or perhaps it's someone who stepped on your toes, offended you, and doesn't seem to notice or care.

Trusting in God's love for you, daring to believe that God is in the fray with you, let me encourage you to "step out on the porch" with that person. Because when it's all said and done, love matters so much more than being right.

And as we move through the holidays, perhaps that's a phrase worth holding onto, repeating over and over until it takes root in our hearts – love matters more than being right. Say it with me, "Love matters more than being right." And don't ever forget just how loved you are.

Let's pray,
God of grace, scripture says that even while we were wrong, Christ died for us, because love mattered more. In this moment of silence, we invite you into the messy and broken relationships of our lives. Grant us the humility to value love over ego, and the courage to step out on the porch and seek reconciliation rather than holding a grudge. Because we dare to believe that love matters more than being right.

We pray this in the strong name of Christ and together all God's people said, Amen!