

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Promises To Build On: Prayers

Philippians 4:1-9

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Rev. Max Vincent, Senior Pastor

Today begins our Stewardship emphasis. We are building on the promises each member makes when becoming a part of Johns Creek United Methodist Church to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. These five promises are part of what holds us together as the Body of Christ. We each have different gifts and abilities, so we live these promises differently, but we all commit to these five practices as part of our common Christian life. The question we are asking over the next five weeks is how are you living out each promise, and how might you grow and build on that foundation? These five practices are foundational to our lives as Christians and our life together as the Body of Christ.

This morning, we focus on the promise to support the church with our prayers. One of the joys of being a part of this fellowship is the many prayer opportunities we have. Our prayer team gathers the prayer requests each week and shares those joys and concerns. One member writes notes to those added to the prayer list. We have our prayer shawl ministry. Members create these beautiful shawls that are mailed to those we are praying for, and the shawl reminds them that they are covered in prayers. In our Children's Chapel, there is a prayer wall where prayers of our children are posted. The kids have prayer journals that help them grow in their practice of prayer. Sunday school classes and other small groups have their own networks of supporting and lifting each other up in prayer.

Prayer is vital to our life together as the church. Congregations should be schools of prayer, places where we both learn and grow in our practice of prayer, and communities where we lift one another up in prayer. However, many members share with me that they often struggle with prayer. They have questions about how to do it and what we are trying to do when praying. Many say they don't know where to start. When they sit down to pray, they feel overwhelmed. With all the praying going on, there is war in Gaza and Ukraine, devastating earthquakes in Afghanistan, floods, famine, and drought. When thinking about our

personal lives, we might feel that our cares are so minor in light of such global events. So, what are we supposed to pray for?

In our second scripture reading today, Paul writes about prayer as the foundation of our life together as the church. He answers some of those questions about feeling anxious and overwhelmed by all that is happening in the world and says, that's exactly why we pray. The passage is in Philippians 4: 1-9:

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.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,^[a] help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my coworkers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice^[b] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.^[c] ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious 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.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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^[d] these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Context: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." When we hear Paul say that, we are tempted to think Paul does not care in the world, that everything is going great, and Paul has nothing to worry about. We start to think, "What does that have to do

with us and our situation. What about when we've lost a job or a loved one is sick? What are we supposed to do when times are hard, and all the news seems to be bad, Paul?" To put this passage in context, at the beginning of this letter, Paul shares that he is in prison. He is awaiting trial for his witness to the gospel. Paul is not sure if the verdict will be freedom or death. His life is in the balance.

Paul also shares that he knows the Christians in Philippi are being persecuted for their faith. They are ostracized and ridiculed for their beliefs about Jesus. There is conflict in the church. Paul calls out two women by name who have some disagreement and pleads for them to be reconciled. Can you imagine that, it's one thing for everyone to know there's some disagreement, but it's another thing for the preacher to name you in the sermon. In this space, Paul says, do not lose heart. Do not be overwhelmed. Let your cares be known to the Lord.

Rejoice! Paul starts with a command to rejoice. He uses this word some 14 times in this short letter. Here, it appears twice in one short verse, and both times, rejoice is an imperative. Rejoice! Rejoice; don't just expect joy to occur. Commit yourself to joyful practices. Keep on in all circumstances. Rejoice always!

There is a difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is rooted in what happens to us. Joy is not based on current circumstances or situations. This is why Paul says, rejoice in the Lord. Our joy is based in what God has done in the death and resurrection of Christ.

Paul and Silas set an example of such joy at the founding of this church in Acts 16. When they first came to Philippi, they were thrown in jail. Throughout the night, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns. An earthquake opened the prison doors, and the jailer woke up and assumed that everyone had fled and was preparing to kill himself. Paul called to him and said, "Don't harm yourself! We're down here still singing; come join us." The jailer brought them out, and he and his household joined the church. Again, I say rejoice.

Joy is essential to Paul. Joy should be part of our Christian character. It doesn't mean everything always goes well for us or we never experience sorrow or hardship. It means that we know no matter what situation or circumstance we are in, God is with us. Rejoice!

Be gentle. Next, Paul says be gentle with one another. No one is at their best right now. When we feel stressed and anxious about our circumstances, we tend to behave in our worst ways. Just at the time when we need a little more grace, we become short and touchy. We feel that in our world today because of war in Ukraine and Gaza. We can see that in our country with how our political parties treat each other. We can feel it in the church whenever we have any disagreement. And, no doubt, each of us have memories of times in our personal relations where we took out our fears and anxieties on those closest to us. Be gentle to all, believer and nonbeliever alike.

Christ is near, do not neglect the divine presence. The Lord is at hand, live in his presence. Be gentle.

Pray! Pray! Pray! Don't obsess over your worries, but don't brush them aside either. Share them with God. This grows out of a sense that Lord is near, and God cares about all of who we are. God doesn't carve out a spiritual part or a soul that God is concerned about. God cares about our spiritual, mental, and physical well-being. Share with the Lord in all situations.

Paul uses three synonyms for prayer; prayer, requests, and supplications. It's like Paul is saying: Pray! Pray! Pray! Nothing is so big or overwhelming that it is going to stump God. But there is also nothing so small or insignificant that God doesn't care about it. Jesus says God cares about the birds in the air and the flowers in the meadow.

Paul adds to this threefold call to prayer thanksgiving. Offer everything to God with thanksgiving. Paul is saying to start our prayers with thanks. He is not saying pray, and then once God gives you what you want, then give God thanks. Paul wants us to start with giving thanks.

Years ago, I was going through a difficult time. It seemed like everything in the church I was serving was going wrong. My personal life seemed to be falling apart. The therapist I was seeing at the time had me

write out five things I was thankful for each day. I was so focused on what was going bad that the first week I was barely able to list five things for the week. My therapist challenged me to focus on little things that I often take for granted each day, like hot water when I turned the faucet on, food on the shelves when I went to the grocery store. After the second week, I had five things to give thanks for each day. Most days I copied what I had the day before. Turns out, I had hot water seven days in a row. My therapist challenged me during the next week to give thanks for five things each day and not repeat anything for seven days. I got through it. Over time, this became a habit, and, while I don't do this practice every day, there are times when I start to feel overwhelmed by things going on in and around me, when I will get out my journal and just start listing things to give God thanks for as I start my prayers. Count your blessing name them one by one.

Guarded by Peace. In offering our thanks and whatever cares or requests come to our mind, Paul is reminding us that prayer is meant to be a conversation with God. God longs to be in communication with us. That's why nothing is off limits. So, this conversation with God will seal you in God's peace. Commit to tally up the good things that are happening. Share your requests. *And the peace of God will guard you.*



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