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Philippians 4:1-9
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Rejoicing in what is “Good”

And so we come to the end of this joy filled letter that Paul sent to the Philippians to give them a chance at living this new Jesus way. And so today we hear Paul’s benediction, the last good words he tells them before he says goodbye. I wonder what I would say to you all as a last sermon or what you might tell a loved one before you moved away to a different city. In short he tells them to put aside their conflicts, rejoice in the Lord always, and meditate upon whatever is true and good.

Prayer: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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

While I am not going anywhere, today we will say goodbye to Paul. So what good word does Paul leave us with. He tells us to rejoice in what is good. 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.

What do you think is good?

Everything that I think is good is informed by my life experience. My views on nature were formed by going out into the boundary waters as a kid, hiking mountains in Oregon with my family, and witnessing the destruction of coal in the communities where it was mined and around the world. So when I read Genesis 1, and read about how God’s creation is very good, I read our stewardship of creation as a failure because of human greed and ignorance. I read the Bible a certain way because of my life experiences.

So what are we to make of Paul here, he tells us to focus on whatever is true, good, just, and pure, knowing full well that each person who reads this is going to interpret this differently. That both Euodia and Syntyche were women who disagreed about what was good. Hmmm, I do not know why Euodia and Syntyche were fighting, but I do know that a lot of the reason why we fight today is because of the blessing and curse of postmodernism, when the grand narratives of shared truth buckled under the power of our lived experiences. To use an earlier example, the grand narrative of Genesis 1 means that humankind are masters of nature, but how can I say this when we have done so much to spoil the beauty of nature and we humans are so small compared to the Bootleg fire that is burning almost 300,000 acres of southern Oregon.

And so, our experiences have shaken the simplistic truths many of us once held. So what do we do now?

Rejoice in what is good. 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.

Paul is no stranger to the conflict that comes with being a part of a faith community. Paul was front and center between conflicts between Pharisee Jews and Christ following Jews. Between people who thought circumcision was necessary to follow Jesus and Paul who thought it was not. Between people who ate according to Kosher and those who ate meat sacrificed to pagan gods. And yes, this mysterious conflict between Euodia and Syntyche.

What is true? Well I'm sure the Pharisees have their own ideas about that.

What is honorable? Circumcision of course

What is just? Serving the poor, as long as the poor are not Samaritans, Lepers, or prostitutes.

What is Pure? Men of God who only ever eat with other men of God.

I believe that Paul knew that while everyone could agree on these words, that Paul also knew that everyone disagreed about what was pleasing to God.

So what are we to do?

Rejoice anyway. Follow what is good anyway. Because the peace of God surpasses all understanding. In the end, we all stand accountable before God and we all have to make peace with the fact that (to borrow a contemporary phrase) haters are going to hate, so shake it off. Some of us will go through life with unpopular opinions because we have lived unique lives and met unique people. Some of us are going to read the Bible differently than how it has been read for the past thousand years. And that is okay. Because Paul does not invite us to follow the letter of the law, but is calling us to the spirit of the law, which invites us into a very Biblical call to re-interpret what is true and good with every new generation.

Ezra and Neemiah believed the people of God should divorce their foreign wife, so Ruth showed them a love story of a foreign wife marrying into the lineage of King David and Jesus. Exodus and Leviticus were growing stale, so the writers of the exile created a book called, the second law, Deuteronomy.

The Eunuch was barred from being a part of temple worship, but Isaiah said they were welcome.

Rejoice! In what is good. I don't get to decide what that is. We decide. And the Holy Spirit will call our children to decide differently. And so on and so forth. This is a call for rejoicing. For God does not call us to stay in one place. Instead, we are called to follow the mystical journey of the Holy Spirit. To figure out what is good. So in the words of the Mother Abbess in the sound of music: Climb every mountain, to search high and low. Follow every highway, every path you know. Ford every stream, follow every rainbow. Until you find your dream. And once you find that dream, that good thing. Give it all the love you can give every day of your life. For as long as you live. Amen.