

Wesley United Methodist Church
October 11, 2020
“Think on These Things”ⁱ
Scripture: Psalm 106:1-5
Philippians 4:1-9

Does it feel like there are too many things to think about these days? Are you getting tired of zoom meetings rather than face-to-face? Are you fed up with political speeches? Are you finding these things take more and more of your time?

If so, you are in good company. Many of us feel that way right now. This week, I read about a comment made by an individual that caused me to just walk around the house, not being able to put words to my reactions or to focus on anything else.

I find more and more that my conversations with people are turning toward the election, or response to Covid or something else over which I very limited control. I find myself speculating about what will happen after the election and analyzing all of the possible scenarios. Is that your experience as well?

If it is, I want to invite you to walk with me through the rest of the story. If you are not doing this, let me know who you are so that I have someone to call when I’m obsessing, or need someone to redirect my brain cells and my energy.

Let me tell you about an “aha” moment and a turn in the road. As I was reading and meditating on the scriptures for today, I realized that I have been allowing these things to take up residence in my brain, my heart, and just generally in my life. I’m not charging rent and like a self-centered house guest, they are spreading out and taking up too much space, time, and energy. For many of us today, many of the demands upon our mental space are not really things that enhance our lives or serve to benefit us in any real way.

In our scripture from Philippians today, Paul writes about reorienting the mind and I found myself being drawn to what he said. I’m wondering what your reaction was when you heard those words. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. ... Do not worry about anything.” Did you, maybe, hear those words as, “Oh no! One more thing to do! One more thing I can’t manage. With everything going on, what do I have to rejoice about?”

If you did, please bear with me, because I have come to see these words not as another almost impossible thing to add to the “to-do” list or one more thing to make us feel inadequate. Instead if we stay with him, I think Paul offers some important help in reorienting our mind and getting rid of those things that are taking up too much space, or at least limiting them to a manageable area.

Paul isn't ordering us to feel differently than we do. He isn't trying to make us feel badly for experiencing things the way we do. He's offering us another possibility – one that is much better for us in so many ways.

When my granddaughter was very young, I took her with me to go see my mother in the nursing home. We spent about 15 minutes with my mother, and about an hour getting back to the car. There was a swing underneath the roof overhang and she and I sat on the swing. It's almost like a wind tunnel there and she screeched with joy, laughing. Every time the swing stopped, she would say, “gain, Nana, 'gain”.

At the beginning I kept thinking about the other things we were supposed to be doing, and like a purpose-driven adult I was ready to go to the car and move on with the next thing of the day. Soon her joy and enthusiasm broke through to me and I settled in to enjoy a young child discovering the world and being excited about the feel of the wind through her hair and the joy of sitting on a swing with her Nana. More than 11 years later, it is still one of my most cherished memories.

I saw a busy day. She saw and felt the wind. I experienced a time crunch of my own making. She was fully present and open to something that was brand new to her. Initially we were having two very different experiences, but thankfully, they became one as I began to see and experience it through the eyes and life of a toddler.

In life, we may be doing the same thing as someone else but experience it in a very different way. I think that sometimes that may be influenced by what we were looking for, what we expected to see and feel, and not so much by the external circumstances of it.

Paul is writing from jail, and he is concerned about a dispute or disagreement between two women of the church. He urges people to help the two women work through their disagreement because they have both been working alongside him trying to share the gospel. He doesn't want the young church to be split by a disagreement

among its members, but even more so, he wants them to be able to experience the joy and peace that can and should be part of their relationship with God.

Rejoice always. But how?

By not being anxious. But how?

By praying, sharing our requests with God – and doing so with thanksgiving.

We might think of prayer as going the other way. We come to God asking for something and when God answers our prayer, then we say thank you. But Paul is encouraging them to do the opposite. Come to God with thanksgiving first, before making our requests known. How do we do this? It begins with an attitude of gratitude. It begins by looking around us and seeing the many things for which we can be thankful. It begins by thinking about those things that are pure, and honorable, and just, and pleasing, and commendable.

If we begin by looking for something that is good – that makes a difference. While my brain is being taken over by things that cause anxiety or fears about the election, or Covid, or I can also look around to see what is good. I can see over 200 jars of peanut butter in the entry of the church that will go to the Northern Rhode Island Food Pantry and when combined with donations from others will feed about 450 families in our area this month.

I can look at the energy and passion of a young woman in a video you will see soon and celebrate that since Covid began we have provided meals to front line workers in three different facilities and are now planning to provide something for the fire fighters in our town. I can see how people in this church and community have responded to the needs of others.

I can look at the leaves turning colors around me here in New England and marvel at the beauty of God's creation.

If you and I look to these and other places where we can be thankful and bring those to God in prayer in thanksgiving, we may just start to discover that our attitude will change a little bit. The more we look for things that are beautiful, authentic, examples of caring, justice the more we will start to see them around us.

As we start to see more good things around us, we may start to be a little less anxious about other things. We may start to think that something good may come into

those places of anxiety rather than that things will get worse. I remember one time about 30 years ago when I was very concerned about how I was going to pay some bills. One day an envelope arrived in the mail with \$80 in cash in it. No note. Nothing to indicate who it had come from.

To this day, I have no idea where it came from or who sent it, but I remember that surprising gift that brought hope to a time of anxiety. I could tell you about other times when something has happened at just the right time. I don't often think about those things, but they have happened enough that when I open my eyes and heart, I can remember that I don't walk through the anxiety and difficult times by myself.

When our anxiety decreases, then our rejoicing is able to increase. We start to recognize the blessings around us, the little things that we often take for granted but that make a difference in our lives.

When we begin with thanksgiving, take time to pray, discover our anxiety decreasing, find ourselves rejoicing more; when these become more habitual and more natural, then we may discover that we have also reached the goal of peace, the peace of God which passes all understanding.

The song that Martha sang at the beginning of our worship speaks to this. "Come away with me to a quiet place, apart from the world with its frantic pace, to pray, reflect, and seek God's grace. Come away with me. Come away."ⁱⁱ Take time to pray, to be with God.

"Come and pray with me on a gentle sea, on top of a hill in the Galilee, in gardens like Gethsemane, Come away with me, Come away." Can't you just picture places like that? A gentle sea, the top of a hill, a garden. Places that can cause us to pause and see the beauty around us and give thanks to God. "Come today with thoughts of the countless ways that God's steadfast love blesses all our days, and join with me in silent praise. Come away with me. Come away." Let us open our eyes to the ways that God does bless us every day – in small and large ways.

Recognizing the blessings around us, we come with thanksgiving to God and share what is upon our hearts. "Come and say, in words whispered from your soul, the feelings and actions you can't control. Your spirit needs to be made whole. Come away with me. Come away. Come away with me to a quiet place, to God's loving arms

waiting to embrace all those who come in hope of grace. Come away with me. Come away.” Whatever is bothering us, we can bring to God who is eager to help make our spirits whole, to be healing to our hearts and our lives, to embrace us within the loving arms of grace.

When we begin to do these things, then we find ourselves better able to think about these things, the things that should fill our minds, things that are true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious. We find ourselves focusing on “the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We definitely need to pay attention to the upcoming election and we all need to vote in the way that we believe will help bring life and love to all of God’s people. We need to pay attention to those who are hungry and to recognize that we can be part of the solution to their hunger. We need to pay attention to places of injustice and work to bring about justice. We need to act in ways that help protect others from Covid 19 and other threats to their health. All of these things and many others need to take up some space in our brains and our hearts.

But my prayer is that rather than seeing them as something horrible of which we should be afraid, or something that we are helpless to do anything about, we can instead recognize those who are doing something. We can see ourselves being agents of grace and peace and love in these places. Instead of becoming overwhelmed or paralyzed by them, we can recognize that while we can’t do everything, we can do something.

We can be the hands and feet of Christ in our world. We can think on the things that bring life and hope and we will find ourselves giving them more space in our brains and hearts. Our thinking and seeing will become reoriented in ways that will make it easier to cope with the many things that try to overwhelm us.

I want to encourage each of us to take one more step in that direction this week. Maybe for you, it will be committing to looking for and paying attention to one thing that is beautiful or one act of kindness that you see. Maybe it will be noticing 10 beautiful things and performing several acts of kindness yourself. Maybe it will be You fill in the blank.

When you find yourself engaging in conversations about fears for the future, or the security and outcome of our election, or another killing of a person of color you might try to stop and look for signs of hope somewhere in there. One of the many places I sometimes find hope is in my grandchildren.

I think about how much the world has changed since my parents were growing up and how much it has changed since I was growing up. I think how different it was when my children were growing up, and now what it is like for my grandchildren. I know that there are many many things that need to continue to change, and I will commit to helping to make those changes happen.

But I am also going to commit to being intentional about thinking about the many signs of hope and possibility and blessing and beauty that are around me. I hope to put up a “no vacancy” sign in my head for the things that don’t belong there and make more room for the things that do. I invite you to do that with me.

Let us pray.

Our loving God, when the world seems overwhelming, help us to remember to turn to you. Open our eyes, ears, and heart that we may see the many good things that are around us. Help us to think about these things and to be transformed by these things so that we may live fully the lives that you call us to embrace and to make possible for all of your people. Amen.

ⁱ The idea for focusing on “Think on these things” and some preliminary thoughts came from Dr. Derke Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries from the UM Board of Discipleship worship notes for this week.

ⁱⁱ Quoted throughout: “Come Away with me” Words by Mark Nelson Keithahn. [Faith We Sing](#), #2202

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Message](#) Philippians 4:8