

"The Healthy Church"

Rev. Peter Bynum
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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. ²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, 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. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:1-9)

It is widely believed that the Philippian church was always Paul's favorite. It was the first church he planted in Europe, born in a colony where the Jewish population welcomed Paul with open arms and loved him immediately as their pastor. It was a church of generosity, full of people who opened both their hearts and their pocketbooks to help struggling Christians in Jerusalem. Paul's deep affection for this particular church is clear in the heartfelt words he offered to them. Even languishing in a Roman prison, we hear Paul's spirits soar as he writes to people he describes as "*my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.*"

From this deep well of love, Paul draws a passionate hope that his favorite church would succeed. He wants them to make it. He wants them to stand firm in the Lord. He wants them to continue to be the people of faith that they have already shown themselves to be. So, as he draws his letter to a close, Paul lists for his friends and fellow Christians a set of characteristics that a healthy and mature church should have. In the Presbyterian world, we tend to use the term "marks" to describe a list of this nature, so we could say that Paul, in these verses, enumerates for us the "marks" of a truly healthy church.

The first is **FORGIVENESS**. To illustrate this point, Paul references two particular women, Euodia and Syntyche, who had clearly gotten into it about something. We don't know what the squabble was about, but it seems that everybody in the church knew about it. Earlier in his letter, Paul had urged the community to "be of the same mind" in Christ Jesus, and now he makes that call concrete and personal in this situation. He calls them to work it out, to find a way to be of the same mind in the Lord. But I am even more intrigued by what Paul says next. He gives a follow-up instruction to a third party, an unnamed loyal servant there in Philippi, to "help these women."

In the African American church, a code has developed that allows a congregation to communicate with a preacher in real time, during the sermon. If he or she is getting close to a point that might eventually hit home, congregants can call out "**Well... Well...**" This is more of a question than a statement, but it is still a cue that what the preacher is saying at least has the potential of being worthwhile. If the preacher is lucky, that could be followed by an "**All Right... All Right...**," which means that he is getting even warmer. It effectively says, "We are still listenin', preacher, keep on going..."

If the preacher succeeds in carrying the sermon to pay dirt, the victory could be confirmed with a simple but passionate "**Amen!**" Or, if he dares to dream, he might hope for the *coup de gras* of all affirmations: "**Glory Hallelujah!**"¹

Of course, in the white church, all of these cues have been collapsed into one: [looking at watch] "**Stop... stop...**"²

But if we can go back to the African American tradition for a moment, there is one final shout-out that I have not mentioned, and it is the one that means the preacher is in real trouble. If the sermon is about to go off the rails for good, the pastor might hear a bellowed prayer: "**Help 'em Lord! Help 'em!**" While hearing that may not be good news in that moment, the pastor knows it is ultimately good news, because outburst proves that they are all in this together. It proves that the congregation is invested in the preacher's success. The community roots for the preacher, because the community knows it needs to embrace and celebrate the Word of God together.

This is essentially what Paul is saying to this deputized individual. "**Help 'em!**" Euodia and Syntyche's feud is beginning to affect the overall health of the church. So, in addition to calling on the women to help themselves, Paul also commissions a third party to lend support. "Help these women work it out," Paul says. "They are good people, good workers, but their effectiveness is being hindered and their energy is being wasted." With that one instruction, the giving and receiving of grace becomes a goal and work of the entire community, not just two individuals.

The first mark of the Healthy Church, Paul says, is that it is a place where forgiveness is actively sought, encouraged and assisted by the entire body of believers. The Healthy Church is a system of grace that works together to make reconciliation happen.

The second mark is **JOY**. Joy is a huge concept for Paul, especially in this letter to the Philippians. In this short letter, he uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" at least 12 times. As Paul saw it, joy is the natural byproduct of a community that is following the Christ who calls us all to abide in God's love. "As the Father has loved me," Jesus says, "so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." And where does all that love lead? Jesus answers that clearly: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."³

That is Paul's hope, too. He, too, urges the Philippians to make his joy complete by emulating the selfless, sacrificial love of Christ in their own lives. Any church that is doing that well – that is sharing in the heavenly mind that loves like Christ, without fear or reservation -- will naturally experience deep and abiding joy. The Healthy Church rejoices in the Lord always; again I will say, it always rejoices.

The third mark is **GENTLENESS**. The popular commentator William Barclay says that this word Paul uses here, *epieikeia*, is one of the most difficult to translate in all of biblical Greek. In addition to "gentleness," it has been translated across the centuries as "patience," "consideration," "graciousness," "modesty," "forbearance," "fairness," "reasonableness" and "moderation."

The best way to translate it, however, may simply be "a higher justice."⁴ This is the kind of justice that rises above strict legalisms, that knows not to push a literal application of a law too far. It is the ability to take people as we find them, to take into account the struggles or disadvantages that others may have. It is the kind of justice that Jesus embodied when he reminded a crowd that was ready to stone a woman for her sins that none of them were without sin, that grace in a

¹ Mark Barger Elliott *Creative Styles of Preaching*, 25

² Credit for this joke has to go to Tony Campolo, who told a version of it at Windy Gap, NC in October of 1989.

³ John 15:9-11

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, Revised Edition, Louisville: Westminster Press (1975), 75.

community is not weakness but strength. When we know we are safe in God, it is easier for us to treat others in ways that make them feel safe, too. When we remember that we have received boundless grace ourselves, it is easier to offer grace to others. Gentleness, as Paul understands it, is in no way a soft or passive pursuit. It is not something that weak people can do. It is, as pastor Wesley White has written, more like “spiritual judo,” a skill and a commitment that must be constantly balanced “and rebalanced as contexts change.”⁵ The Healthy Church is full of people who practice this art of spiritual judo, people who are committed to not only being just but also understanding, gracious and gentle in their treatment of others.

The fourth mark of the Healthy Church is **PEACE**. Even as Paul is describing a church that practices forgiveness, experiences joy and walks through life in gentleness, he knows that the rest of the world rarely plays by those rules. No matter how hard the church works, things are going to come up. Things will sometimes go wrong. And when they do, Paul wanted them to have a nugget of spiritual gold – a strategy for coping based on prayer and thanksgiving. When things come up, Paul says, “*do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”

Notice that Paul does not say that if you pray this way, whatever you ask for will be granted. That’s what makes this one of the best hospital prayers there is. When you are sitting at the bedside of someone who has just been handed a terrible diagnosis, when the odds of a good result are as long as they can get, prayer may not bring about the result that we really want. Even so, there is a guarantee in this prayer – a guarantee that when we come before God with gratitude for the blessings that we have received, when we pour our hearts out to God knowing how much he loves us, we may not be blessed in this moment with what we want, but we will always be blessed with what we need, which is the peace of knowing that we are always safe in God’s loving arms. That peace, Paul says, will guard us. Literally, the Greek says that peace will “stand as a sentinel” for us... that peace will keep watch over us... that peace will defend us with whatever means are necessary.⁶

The Healthy Church is a community in which grateful prayer offers us access to a peace that surrounds us in a love and a security that we cannot fully comprehend.

The next mark of the Healthy Church is **MEDITATION ON THE GOOD**. Here again, Paul gives us real, practical advice on faithful living, a pragmatic strategy that can help us in good times and bad. He urges the church to think about good things -- pure things, honorable things, commendable and excellent things. If our goal is to share the mind of Christ in our community, then Paul knows it would be wise for us to train ourselves to focus primarily on things that would be pleasing to God.

Most of us in the room who remember the advent of personal computers are likely to remember the game "Tetris." In the game, a series of colored blocks of various shapes dropped down the screen. The player's task was to rotate those blocks and move them into a position so they would fit neatly into the stack below. It was really addictive, and if you played long enough, you would find yourself seeing blocks falling in your imagination. Sometimes, the game even made it into our dreams. When a psychiatry professor from Harvard named Robert Stickgold experienced this phenomenon himself, he surmised that the brain, having been introduced to a new task, would train itself to be better at the game long after active engagement had ended. The studies he conducted in the wake of this discovery led him to breakthrough understandings of how the neural connections in our brains can remap themselves into new patterns in response to new stimuli. Since that time, other researchers have demonstrated that this "Tetris Effect" can actually change

⁵ <http://kcmlection.blogspot.com/2006/12/third-sunday-of-advent-c3.html>

⁶ Barclay, 78. Strong’s #5432, φρουρέω, <http://biblehub.com/greek/5432.htm>

negative thinking patterns into positive ones.⁷ In other words, it is possible to retrain and remap the neurons in our brains to be more positive and healthy in our thoughts and outlook.

Paul, however, is talking about something much more than "the power of positive thinking." Paul is talking about the power of Godly thinking. For Paul, a faithful Jew from birth, things that are pure, honorable and just are always found in God. Like the psalmist of Psalm 1, who claims that the path to happiness is to meditate on God's law day and night, Paul urges the faithful to set our brains on the goodness, the justice, the mercy and the joy of God. Although he didn't have the science to back it up, Paul still realized that if we can just visualize God's goodness and justice long enough and passionately enough, then we will soon find ourselves conforming to that vision.

Therefore, the Healthy Church is one that meditates on the goodness of God day and night. It is constantly training its mind to be oriented toward the things of God.

Thinking about the good things of God, however, is not enough in itself, and that is why the final mark of the Healthy Church that Paul shares with Philippi is **IMITATION OF THE GOOD**. He has already written to them, "*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us*" (Philippians 3:17). Paul, who had dedicated himself to imitating Christ, expected his followers to imitate his discipleship in the same way. This was the hard, gritty work of willing the images of justice, purity and goodness into reality. It is the same idea that Martin Luther King, Jr. shared with the civil rights advocates in Birmingham, Alabama. Although King had just been jailed for his activism, he urged others to be bold just as he had. Even though parents of children and students who were getting arrested for the cause were beginning to get cold feet, King urged them to keep the faith. "Keep this movement going," he said. "Keep this movement rolling... in spite of the difficulties... Keep climbing. Keep moving. If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl, but by all means keep moving!"⁸

The Healthy Church does not just think about good things. Instead, it keeps that vision constantly in its mind and keeps climbing and keeps moving steadily toward that image, even in the face of challenge... even in the face of violence... even if it has to crawl.

To his favorite church, to the people he loved the most in the world, Paul describes the marks of the Healthy Church he hoped they would maintain -- one that is characterized most by forgiveness, joy, gentleness, peace, meditation on the good and imitation of the good. May we, too, hold these as our goals for this community of faith.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **Amen**.

⁷ Walter Chen, "How To Rewire Your Brain for Positivity and Happiness," <https://blog.bufferapp.com/how-to-rewire-your-brains-for-positivity-and-happiness>.

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPvH_KpIeFw