

GIFTS THAT LAST: Peace (Philippians 4:4-13 NRSV)

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Sometimes I like to take shortcuts in life. Sometimes the shortcut is indeed the quickest route between points A and B. Sometimes the shortcut is all about avoiding something or someone I want to avoid. Which often no longer qualifies as a short cut because it ultimately takes longer ... a lot longer.

Sometimes the shortcut is harmless. Like this one I am about to confess to you today. For a couple years or so, I wore pants with a hem I had stapled because I was too lazy to get it hemmed properly. Yes, you heard correctly I stapled the hem. And this wasn't just a quick fix ... it was repeat stapling for a couple of year. But seriously how often do people even look at the hem of your pants. Now, you need to know my mother did teach me better than this. She would want you to know this, but I still went for the shortcut.

But other shortcuts I have taken were not so harmless. A few year ago, there was a rift in a relationship that was very hurtful – for both myself and my friend. Because I did not want to deal with the hard, I tried the path of least resistance ... I just pretended there wasn't any conflict. I would talk about every other possible topic, but not the one that needed to be addressed. I would put a smile on my face and never acknowledge the elephant in the room. But that elephant just kept getting bigger and bigger. I finally had no choice but to face the hard that I'd been avoiding. Thankfully, God has done some amazing healing in that relationship, but I sure didn't make it easy... and that shortcut definitely took longer and cost more because I was trying to avoid conflict.

Here's the thing: we can't just staple the hem of life and relationships when they unravel.

We try. Oh, how we try. Anything to pretend all is well. All is calm. All is controlled. All is at peace. On the surface, we project that all is well, but underneath the surface, it is anything but well. I imagine many of you are feeling this way in this season. We sing about silent nights where all is calm, but we live in loud days where all are two seconds from having a complete breakdown in aisle 9.

I love peace and calm. If you are familiar with the Enneagram, a system of personality typing, I am a 9. Nines are referred to as the Peacemakers. We want nothing more than peace on Earth, goodwill to all. We just don't always like the conflict that might be necessary to make true peace possible. It is tempting and easier to create an illusion of peace. To gloss over or avoid hard things, to lose ourselves in numbing activities, and to ignore anything that might feel like conflict, to take shortcuts. It is easy to mistake calm or lack of friction for peace, to sweep

things under the rug and call it good. So, while we are called peacemakers, we often function as peacekeepers. And there is a big difference between the two.

Real peace, the peace of Christ, isn't about a lack of conflict. As Jesus gathered with his closest friends and followers in the upper room on the eve of the darkest days of Christ's time on earth, as Christ endured betrayal and abandonment by close friends, and as he prepared for torture and a painful crucifixion on the cross, in the midst of all that Jesus said to these believers and to us, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."* John 14:27

The Apostle Paul, a devoted follower of Jesus, understood this as well. Paul is the author of our scripture passage today that Abby read for us earlier. Philippians is a letter written by Paul to some followers of Jesus in a town called Philippi; a letter Paul wrote while in prison. Paul does not say what caused his arrest nor what he is being accused of, but he does say his imprisonment is for Christ. While it is Paul who is in prison, he understands that it is the gospel which is on trial.¹ And in this setting, Paul writes a letter about joy, a letter about contentment.

I don't know about you but if I ever find myself in prison or jail and I'm given some stationary and a pen, I don't know if my letter back home would be about joy and contentment. I mean, who would expect that? How can Paul, in prison, write from a place of peace? *How can we, with the things going on in our lives and our world, live from a place of peace?*

First, let's begin with talking about what peace really is because there are some confusing ideas about peace.

The Hebrew word for "peace" is Shalom. In the Bible, God's peace—shalom—meant so much more than the absence conflict. It meant so more than living unbothered by life. The longing for God's shalom included those things, but for Jewish believers, peace was much bigger and richer. Shalom meant not only inner or spiritual peace; it meant wholeness and the welfare of all creation, and in the Hebrew scripture was frequently used in reference to the wellness of others. "It meant all brokenness would be set right and healed. It meant that people would love one another."ⁱⁱ in word but more importantly in action.

"For the Jews, the hope of shalom was wrapped up in a person. Someone is coming, they believed, who will open the door to peace. The question was who. The prophet Isaiah put it this way: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The Greek word for "peace" is Eirene (i-ray-nay). It means oneness or unity or to bring multiple parts together to form a whole, or to set it as one again. For example, two friends who reconcile after a fight make Eirene, that is they come back together, and their relationship is whole.

Knowing this understanding of Shalom and this understanding of Eirene ... we can see that the peace of God is different from the peace of the world. **Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is working through the conflict to bring peace into our relationships.**

And to bring peace into our relationships, it really does begin with me ... just as the song says. *Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.* I can't be an effective instrument for peace until I find peace within in my relationship with God. And much of what Paul writes in our passage today gives guidance to us on how to receive the gift of God's peace and be people of peace.

Phil 4:4-5, *Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*

Paul encouraged the believers to be known for gentleness and fairness. The Greek word translated as gentleness describes a temperament seasoned and mature. It envisions an attitude fitting to the occasion, levelheaded, and fair. Basically, believers don't need to lose their cool or their mind. We are to be known as even-tempered people, fair-minded people, gentle people. Why? Not only because this is the kind of life God dreams of for those God loves, but because it stands in contrast to the world around us and will make people ask, "That doesn't make sense to me. Explain that to me. Why do you live this way?" Paul says let your gentleness, your levelheaded temperament be known to everyone. And then when they ask how in the world you are the way you are, you can tell them ... it is because of Christ.

But how do we become people of gentleness, even-temperedness? How do I not lose my ever-loving mind, Mel?

Phil 4:6-7 *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.*

People of peace aren't people without problems. People of peace are people who learn to surrender those problems to God. They seek God, leading with worship and gratitude, setting down their worry and fear so that they are free to pick up the peace of God. In other words, as you do your part and release the worry to God, trusting God is who God says God is and God will do what God says God will do, when we give our worries to God, God gifts us with peace. It doesn't always make sense, and it doesn't always look logical to others or ourselves, but not being able to understand doesn't mean it isn't truth. *At least that is what my math teachers use to always tell me.* Paul says, you won't understand it but trust me Worship God, Thank God, Trust God, and in return, the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. The Bible repeatedly tells us to guard our heart and mind for our life is shaped by them. Guarding them means being mindful of what we focus on and think on, what we set our minds and heart on., what we feast on. Like the old saying, "you are what you eat", we are what we "think". When we choose to live thanking God and trusting God, we focus on God's presence, and God gifts us with peace.

Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is trusting the presence of God at work in the conflict.

Paul concludes this section of his letter to the Philippians with reminders on what else to set our minds on and how to live as people of peace. The human mind will always set itself on something and Paul wished that the Philippians would set their minds on the right things, and so he lists them out in verse 8-9.

Phil 4:8-9 Finally, 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. Keep 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.

While God guards our hearts, we are also commanded to focus our lives on things that please God, to make a deliberate choice to set our attention on positive things, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. There is an ongoing back and forth throughout Paul's writings. God is most assuredly and actively at work in the life of the believer. At the same time, believers are commanded to live according to God's ways. God does the work yet gives us work to do. We are invited to receive God's peace **and** invited to be instruments of God's peace. Following Jesus is not simply a matter of enjoying peace in my heart or in my relationship with God. Jesus calls us to join his revolutionary movement of bringing shalom to a broken world. To be peacemakers, not simply peacekeepers.

We begin this peacemaking journey in our homes and neighborhoods and families. We look for the brokenness around us and join God in the work of bringing wholeness, oneness, and restoration to others ... the work of Shalom, the work of I-ray-nay, the work of Peace. We look for what is unraveling and we take it straight to Jesus to mend. This work won't involve shortcuts. Stapling a hem won't cut it in peacemaking. And it isn't something we can do on our own. It is the work of Christ, the Prince of Peace, and he calls us to join him. And here's the good news to us: He doesn't call the perfect; he calls the ones familiar with brokenness. The ones who live dependent on the peace of God themselves. People like you and like me. **Peace is not the absence of brokenness. Peace is trusting the presence of God at work in the brokenness.**

This Advent season, you may wish for (and need) some peace and quiet. You may need to lock yourself in the bathroom for a few moments of alone time from little ones or even big ones. You may need a snow day or two, or a night off with no expectations, obligations, or complications. You may need a quiet morning before everyone awakes to savor a cup of coffee and the stillness of the house. And if I were Santa, I would grant you all these gifts and more.

But the gift I really wish for you, the gift better than all of these, is the gift of God's peace. The gift that whispers to you during the struggles, you are not alone. The gift that whispers to you during the unknown, you are loved. The gift that whispers to you in the anxious moments, you

are safe. The gift that says when you feel the weight of the world on your shoulders, “here, let me carry that for you.” The gift that whispers to you, “I choose you. Let’s bring peace to a broken world” together.

As we near the end of our journey to the manger, let us remember and give thanks for the gifts that last – the gifts of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, and the gift of Jesus Christ, our Prince of Peace.

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Philippians*, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 19.

ⁱⁱ Woodley, M. (2009), *The Peace of Jesus*. Pastor of Compassion Ministries at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois.

ⁱⁱⁱ Woodley, M. (2009), *The Peace of Jesus*. Pastor of Compassion Ministries at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois.