



Proper 23, The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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October 11, 2020

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

An old priest had been in the same Parish for 50 years. He was obstinate, cantankerous, and a thorn in the Bishop's side. The Bishop wanted nothing more than to get rid of the guy, but he feared a backlash from the Parish if he did so.

Finally, the old Priest became extremely ill and was in the hospital at death's door. The Bishop went to visit him, talked with his Doctor, and then was headed home when he ran into the Parish Wardens in the lobby. One of the Wardens asked how Father O'Toole was doing and the Bishop said "it looks like he's going to make a full recovery by tomorrow, be back at church on Sunday, and serve your Parish for another 25 years!" The Wardens were shocked: "last time we talked to the Doctor she said he might die at any time."

"Well, I don't know about that," the Bishop said, "but she told me that I should expect the worst!"

When I hear this morning's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, I find myself thinking about expectations. Paul invited the church at ancient Philippi to view the world with positive expectations: "rejoice!" he told them, ". . . the Lord is near . . . do not worry about anything . . . but make your requests known to God." In some ways these are challenging words. Life is full of stress and difficult situations and our human nature seems to be built for worry. Our survival instinct seems to pressure us into expecting the worst, fearing the unknown, and being filled with doubt about the future.

And then you add to this normal, human disposition the very real crises that we face as a society right now as we struggle through an election year in the midst of a pandemic, and you have a situation almost custom made to send us over the edge with worry and dark expectations.

In the words of St. Paul, Jesus invites us to find a more peaceful path forward.

To think about this invitation to peace, we need to think for a moment about the context in which St. Paul writes these words of encouragement. They come at the end of a letter in which he has spent a considerable

amount of ink reminding the Philippians of who God is and how they are connected to God's life. As in all his letters, Paul reminds us in Philippians that God is not some impersonal, uncaring, force of power. God is the loving, intimate relationship of the Father and the Son. Paul reminds us that God is not some distant and unconcerned being disconnected from us. God is as close as our own breath, our own thoughts, and our own hearts, because the Son has united humanity to God's life by becoming human as we are.

Because Jesus is God in the flesh, God knows in a deep and intimate way what it feels like to be human. God has experienced, in Jesus, the temptation to worry, to fear, and to doubt about the future. In Jesus, God has experienced what it feels like to not be all-knowing or all-powerful and to not know what the future holds.

It is from that place – a place inside human doubt, worry, and fear – that the Holy Spirit of Jesus gives Paul these words to share with us: “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.”

Having experienced what it feels like to be human and be facing the challenges of life, God tells us that one of the keys to experiencing peace, joy, and an absence of worry, is to pay careful attention to what we spend our time thinking about. Where we focus our mental energy has a profound impact on how we experience the spiritual life.

Consider the two present challenges facing our society right now: the pandemic and the difficult election.

Do we need to think about and pay attention to the pandemic? Yes. We need to wear our masks, wash our hands, keep our distance from others, and be careful about how we go about our public lives. Are some of our leaders failing to help us do this? Yes. But constant worrying, fear, and anger about this difficult situation are not helpful. There comes a moment when we must do what we know is right, encourage others to do the same, ignore bad leaders who tell us false platitudes, and put our trust in Jesus to carry us through whatever may come.

Likewise, do we need to think about and pay attention to the election? Yes. This election is one of the most important of our lifetimes'. We are being presented with two very different visions for our nation's future and I would say that it is our duty as both citizens and Christians to cast informed votes. This is not an election where it is okay to not vote. Yet, once again, constant worrying, fear, and anger about this difficult situation are not helpful. There comes a moment when we must cast our vote, encourage others to do the same,

ignore bad leaders who tell us false stories about how our votes don't matter or won't be counted, and put our trust in Jesus to carry us through whatever may come.

Let's boil this down to even more specific actions we can take. If we're going to focus our minds on whatever is true, honorable, and pure, we're probably going to have to limit our intake of news. I would recommend limiting yourself to an hour or less a day. I would strongly urge you to not keep your TV tuned to a news channel all day, every day.

We're probably going to also have to find ways to fill our time that connect us to the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This might vary from person to person, but for many of us it involves activities such as getting outside in nature for moderate exercise, intentionally practicing times of silent reflection, and spending time with the people we love who help us experience the life of God.

Finally, I recommend that you take notice of what triggers anxiety in you and, if possible, avoid it. For example, I noticed some years ago that if I watch a political debate I end up yelling at the television. I haven't watched one in years – I find my peace of mind and connection to God is much stronger when I simply read summaries of the highlights the next day. In order to focus our minds on whatever is true, honorable, and pure, we have to turn away from those things in life that pull us into thinking obsessively about what is untrue, what is dishonorable, and what is impure.

God created us through Christ, in the love of the Holy Spirit, to live lives that look like God's life: lives that are focused on love, joy, hope and peace. God created us for such a life even while knowing that pandemics, elections, and whole host of other hard things would make it challenging for us to embrace the life for which we are created. The good news is that we are not alone as we face these challenges. We have been immersed into the life of God through our baptism and we have been filled with the Holy Spirit. God lives in us and we live in God, as close to him as we are to our own breath, our own thoughts, and our own hearts.

The good news is, if we focus our minds on whatever is true, honorable, and pure, and we keep on doing the things that we have learned and received and heard, then the God of peace will be with us.

Amen.