

“Fall Marching Orders”
Philippians 4:1-9
Shannon Smythe
October 11, 2020
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

Well, I must say that I never would have imagined having the experience of beginning my pastoral ministry at a church under the circumstances we find ourselves in today. And yet here we are. Right now, I’m here at the church on Saturday morning, standing in the pulpit, looking out on empty pews in the sanctuary, but of course by the time you are listening to me describe this, you are at home and it is at least the next day (or maybe even later than that). For so many of us, this is not how we would have ever imagined, much less chosen, our church experience for 2020. Yet here we are; nineteen Sundays after Pentecost and 30 weeks or so since we began worshipping together online.

Speaking liturgically, today we find ourselves firmly in one of many Sundays in the church calendar year referred to as Ordinary Time. The day after Pentecost inaugurates one of several yearly liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time. But Ordinary Time is actually anything but ordinary or mundane. The liturgical focus of this “in between” season is on the profound gift of each Sunday, even of each weekday, as time to celebrate creation and resurrection. Ordinary Time is a reminder that every Sunday, not only Easter Sunday, is a day to commemorate the profound gift of new life in Christ.

And friends, I don’t know about you, but I so desperately need to hear this reminder of the gift of Ordinary Time. I need to remember that the church has gifted us with another way to look at our present circumstances. This is not to deny at all the fact that we are in the midst of a great number of very real and present social, cultural, and political crises. And we will continue to be. We are actually living through the long term effects of a long term global disaster. And many of us are just about now hitting what disaster-relief experts know to be the 6-month wall! Perhaps gift of Ordinary Time during these very trying times is that it allows us to see another reality operating concurrently in our lives: the reality of God’s redemption, already here and still drawing near—even in the midst of a long-term disaster.

Ordinary Time means we get to travel together on a verdant path—one perhaps not unlike some of the beautiful paths in Cape Henlopen State Park or stretches of the Georgetown-Lewes trail. Jerome Berryman has called this time of the Christian year the Great Green Growing season. Green symbolizes life and growth. But it also symbolizes work we can do together to clarify our identity and to live out resurrection’s everyday promises.

In this season of the COVID-19 disaster, as we begin our new life together, with me as your Designated Pastor and you as the congregation God has called me to-love and serve and shepherd and lead, can we allow this morning’s text from Philippians to serve as our marching orders for our life together. In fact, I would invite you to read this passage weekly, if not daily, this fall as we move forward together. Let yourself marinate in its words. Commit them to heart if you can. And right now, let us consider what Paul wants to

show us about our communal identity and what is involved in living out the promise of resurrection in our daily lives.

Paul is living each minute of every day under the threat of execution. He is also certain that this dear church community in Philippi will face its own affliction and opposition in the days ahead. And so, Paul's opening words in 4:1 are to stand firm.

Stand firm: You and I have been called to a new identity in Christ Jesus. This new identity of ours is our true self—that authentic, free self that is in full relationship with God and fully capable of love for self, for others, and for the world.

We also follow after a crucified and risen Lord and thus can expect that our commitment to the gospel will put us at odds with much of the way our world operates. The Philippian believers had much to gain by keeping their faith quiet, clinging only to their Roman citizenship, and demonstrating loyalty to Rome. But Paul knows that is a death knell to the community, and so we should take that to heart for our own situation. The invitation here is for you and I continually to locate our center of gravity in the Lord—standing firm, resting in Christ's presence at each moment. What does that look like? I think it involves knowing, as James Finley said, that "God doesn't love us as we should be, but as we are."

As we stand firm in the Lord, holding fast to our identity as followers of Jesus, then we can be fully present to our current situation—neither nostalgically reaching to the past, grasping for the high days of the church or even life pre-COVID, nor fantasizing about a future we cannot yet see—but instead settling firmly into this present reality in which Christ is present with us, promising to transform us. What does Christ have for you right now—in this moment, this Fall election season, while we worship online and get introduced to one another?

If we are honest, standing firm in the present is hard to do. Many of us are anxious—we are so anxious about the world; about the future of this congregation; and about our personal lives. We look over our shoulder to what was or we daydream about what we think the future should be. In both cases we are looking for any way to avoid the challenge of staying in the present. Because the present time places us firmly in liminal space—that threshold area that is betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. Standing firm in the Lord in such liminal spaces means seeing the present time as sacred space where genuine newness can begin and Christ can do a work of transformation in and among us. Church family, can we commit together to inviting one another to seeing this unique time as a truly sacred time to discern what new thing God is up to among us?

My hope and prayer as I join with you all is that God would transform us together to more fully imitate our Lord Jesus in all we say and do as we seek to live out our church's new vision of caring, sharing, and growing God's love in our communities.

Let's consider some of the very specific insights Paul has for how we can experience new life in Christ as a community. The church in Philippi was suffering, and Paul knows that. So, as we consider his words of encouragement, let us do so knowing that we do not have to

pretend to be a faith community that has it all together. The Philippian church didn't have it all together, none of us do, of course. But sometimes we think church is the place where we have to *act* like we have it all together. But if we expect that, we shut down authenticity and our capacity to truly relate to each other as humans is diminished.

So, first, right off the bat, Paul addresses the tensions that have surfaced within the community. He doesn't deny or ignore the conflict, but instead directly addresses it. To those who are at odds with each other, Paul pleads with them to be reconciled. He honors them for their contributions as his loyal companions but then he calls them all to forbearance (what the NRSV translation calls gentleness in vs. 5 really means "forbearance under opposition").

If we are going to stand firm in the Lord as a congregation, we are going to have practice both mutual forbearance with one another and non-anxious prayerfulness. As we work together to live out our new vision, we will inevitably jostle one another—many of us, at times, employing our sharp edges as a way to find a place for ourselves in the midst of the changes we are experiencing. This will not be new, of course. There have been disagreements and tensions at Westminster already and there will, presumably, be more. Conflict is part of doing life together, and it is also a critical component to enacting change. But, if we are going to stand firm in the Lord, we must bear with one another when disagreements arrive. We must also commit all that we do to God in prayer. Rather than giving into our natural propensity to render harsh judgments on one another when changes or differences are expressed, let's commit to seeking a different way and covering that way in prayer. What is this different way? For Westminster, I believe it means that we must continue to forgive one another. But we must also make genuine space for each of us to find true belonging without fear of harsh judgment or rejection.

The second thing Paul exhorts the community to is what his letter to the Philippians is probably the most known for: rejoicing! Maybe you learned the children's praise song that I sang repeatedly in church growing up: "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice . . ." Paul mentions joy or rejoicing 16 different times in this letter. That should signal to us that joy is central to our new identity in Christ. Unaffected, childlike rejoicing in the Lord is the hallmark of the Christian life. Now, we often think of rejoicing as something that happens inside people, a sense of joy welling up and making them happy from within. All that is important, but in Paul's world and culture this rejoicing would have meant what we call a public celebration. Wow! And Paul doesn't only want us to be joyful in all circumstances, he actually wants us to celebrate exuberantly. How marvelous! But, I wonder, have we taken his word to heart? Or have we written him off as Pollyanna-ish. After all, what kind of fools would we be if we aimed for a public celebration in the Fall of 2020, in the midst of a pandemic? Hmmmm. I wonder! What might the Spirit be saying to us if we read this verse as N.T. Wright translates it: "Celebrate joyfully in the Lord, all the time. I'll say it again: celebrate!"?

Finally, Paul knows that each of these **habits of heart**: joyful celebration, mutual forbearance with each other, non-anxious prayer, and seeking reconciliation with one another, opens us to the peace of God in the same way that some key **habits of mind** do as

well: focusing on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Now before you write this off as just another exercise in the power of positive thinking, remember that Paul himself always perceives a twofold reality in the world: he sees both our flawed and broken world *and* God's work of redemption, which is already here and still drawing near, simultaneously. And it is because Paul knows this second reality—of God's inbreaking presence all around us, all of the time, that he exhorts us to a daily mental discipline that looks for signs of God at work. It is all too easy to default to only focusing on what is false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, and shameful. That is usually all we see and read in the news and on our social media feeds, and it is easy to fixate on these things particularly in times of high anxiety like we are in this season of a prolonged global disaster. But, can we hold one another accountable to looking for God at work in our communities—focusing our attention, for example, on the comfort received by friends of our church who've received a prayer shawl, or on the commitment and love being shown by our essential workers and school district staff and teachers to so many in our communities, or on the generosity and vision of this congregation to help erase \$1.6 million of Delawareans' medical debt?

As we train our mind on these things, Paul promises something truly outstanding: the peace of God that passes all understanding. Again, written from jail, by a man under threat of capital punishment at the hands of a brutal and corrupt regime, these are extraordinary promises. But Paul has learned to see a different reality alongside the violence and duplicity of Rome. And we are called to do the same. Because we follow after a more powerful Lord, who alone has defeated death and therefore can provide us with true peace, quiet minds, and hopeful hearts in this time. And if that is not what we need this Fall, I don't know what is. May it be true for us this season and beyond. Amen!