



October 12, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Philippians 4:1-9

“A Living Letter”

(Ronni read a paraphrase of Pauls’ text, in letter form, placed in envelope)

Did this letter sound familiar? I paraphrased the portion of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi that is our Scripture for today. I tried to put it into words we might use in 2008. Did you recognize it? Sometimes we don’t really hear the words of the Bible. It’s as if we picture them printed in Gothic script in a dusty ancient volume. We forget that the words were ALIVE, written by real people of flesh and blood living in the real world with the same pleasures, problems and pain that we experience.

Try to hear today’s lesson as if we found this portion of a letter in an attic or an old trunk. Our reading is a snippet of a letter Paul wrote to a church he helped establish. He thought of these people (remember the church was the PEOPLE- not a building!)—these people were his “partners in the gospel”. He wrote to the folks “back home” in a way. He knew them all very well. He longed to be with them, but he was in prison. There is no indication that he, or the folks in Philippi ever expected this letter to be passed on, much less as sacred Scripture! Paul wrote it knowing his letter would be read aloud to the whole church—probably something like the way we share announcements, joys and concerns when we gather each week.

Have you ever found an old letter written by a parent or grandparent long before you were born? It’s fascinating, isn’t it? It’s as though a window is opened into their lives and relationships. That’s how it is with the New Testament letters, the

Epistles. The lives of people who lived long before we were born continue to touch us and speak to us. God works through them in OUR lives, so many years later.

It's clear that Paul wrote to his friends in part because he has heard of dissension in the church. We don't know what it was about, but we can FEEL the drama, the pain and heartbreak behind the scenes. Paul names two leaders in the church, both women, and begs them to be instrumental in healing the divisions that are forming.

We learn several things from this. First: from the very beginning the church has wrestled with conflict and diverse opinions. The apostle Paul himself and Jesus' follower Peter did not always agree. This appears to be a fact of life for all people everywhere in all time periods.

The next interesting point is that Paul lifted up the conflict to the whole church. He didn't want to embarrass the two women by having their names read aloud in a church gathering. Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche in a letter to be read to the church because he EXPECTS THE CHURCH TO HELP WITH THE HEALING.

Paul could have kept the matter secret, he could have tried to have the problem settled in private or outside the church, to avoid anyone being upset or disturbed. But he didn't. We know from our own experience that everyone in the church was likely aware of the problems and talking about them anyway! Wounds need the light to heal. Fresh air and sunshine help a lot.

Could it be that in the name of being polite and tactful we keep far too much to ourselves? Paul models an attitude that believes open, caring dealing with differences and conflict CAN BE DONE—it's possible! We won't all end up hating each other. We won't fall apart if we address problems openly. This Scripture can help us tell others what we are really thinking and feeling, in a class, a church meeting, at coffee fellowship or working on a church project.

We are not a strange, defective or unfaithful church if we discover conflicts and disagreements in our church life. Through Paul's letters we discover the truth that throughout all the church's history, people struggled to live and serve Christ in harmony, ministering faithfully in Christ's name.

Another point that's clear from this letter is that in Macedonia, where Philippi was located, women were leaders in the church. Euodia and Syntyche may have opened their homes as meeting places for the church. These women were fellow workers with Paul. In the 16th chapter of Acts, the author tells us that the church at Philippi was begun when Paul went to a place of prayer and "spoke to the women who had

come together”. Perhaps Euodia and Syntyche were among that first group of women.

Paul appeals to these women as friends and co-workers, to find unity in their love for Christ. He then moves on to share words of support and encouragement for the whole church, which seems to have been in a time of great discouragement.

First Paul focuses on joy. He invites us to taste and feel joy—even when things aren’t going along perfectly. I once heard a reflection that has stayed with me through the years. I don’t remember it word for word, but this is what’s stayed with me:

*If I had my life to live over again, next time I would
Laugh more
Look at more sunsets
Pick more daisies
I’d get dirtier
I’d make more mistakes
I’d start going barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later into the fall
I’d swim in more lakes and climb more mountains
I’d be sillier next time and
Notice more colors.*

Friends, we don’t have to wait until some “next time”. We can start this TODAY! Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says. God is very near. God hears, God cares, God offers us peace and fills our minds and hearts with his presence.

Paul reminds his friends, and that includes US, that there is so much that is good, lovely, and wonderful---seeing it, delighting in it, will buoy us up.

Let’s summarize what we’ve learned:

The Bible speaks to real people in the real world.
There is always and always has been dissension in the church.
The whole church needs to help with healing and reconciliation.
Focus on joy. It changes us. It changes the world.
God is close to us. God hears us. God knows us. God has a peace that we need.
Delighting in the good will buoy us up and bring us what God wants us to experience.
God loves us. Right where we are and as we are. In the midst of all that life brings.
REJOICE! May the God of peace be with you!

(Pick up a notecard and write a **living letter** of encouragement to a friend or family member.)