

Endings and Beginnings
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Philippians 4:4-9
November 22, 2015
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What a week this has been! For many of you, what a 6 months this has been! But earlier this week we learned that the Senior Pastor of this church, Rev. Joe Hoffman, resigned after 19 ½ years of significant, life-giving, justice-minded, compassionate ministry. He has been your pastor, counselor, preacher, friend and advocate for a long time. He has been my friend and colleague for a long time. And so it is with grief and a deep sense of loss that we accept his resignation, with prayers for his health and well-being, and with deep gratitude for all that he has done for this congregation and this community and beyond.

And beyond this congregation's particular sense of loss and sadness this week, we as a world community have been deeply saddened and shaken by terrorist attacks in Lebanon, France, and Mali, and by the ongoing seemingly-endless violence in Syria and other parts of the Middle East, and continued violence, racial & ethnic oppression and discrimination in our own country.

Personally, as our admin assistant, Harper, can testify, I have come into the office every morning after listening to the news on my drive in to town, venting about the inexcusable fear-mongering so many of our politicians and elected leaders are promulgating about Syrian refugees. There is nothing Christian or American about shutting our doors to refugees of a horrific civil war. Maybe you have felt some similar outrage.

And then in the midst of all these emotions—sadness, confusion, loss, anger, fear, indignation—we are also celebrating Thanksgiving today. We're singing these uplifting, triumphal, festive hymns of praise and gratitude this morning. And at home we're getting ready for feasts with friends and family celebrating our nation's history and our gratitude for all our many blessings. And we know that this is just the beginning of a month-long season of celebration and good cheer...whether we feel like it or not.

In short, we come together today with a jumble of emotions—ranging from emptiness, estrangement, and bewilderment to sadness, fear, and anger to thanksgiving, compassion, and hopefulness. It's hard to know where to begin dealing with all of this.

So I have landed on these verses from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi:

“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. 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.”

I know that might sound a bit like Pollyanna or maybe Monty Python's “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” but if you know anything about the Apostle Paul, you know he's not known as a warm, fuzzy kind of guy who is always whistling a happy tune. This morning I remembered a debate we had in one of my classes in college about whether Paul was an optimist or pessimist.

The outcome was that he was definitely a pessimist about human nature...and an optimist about God. When you read his letters you'll see that he doesn't hold back from thoroughly chastising his readers on a regular basis. Paul also didn't live a cushy life filled with niceties and easy answers. In fact, he wrote this letter while he was sitting in jail and his ministry was being attacked by other preachers. Yet, he understood that the way forward was not by dwelling on the negatives that he couldn't change, but by trying to stay focused on what is just, true, honorable, and praiseworthy. To try to let prayer replace worry.

This week one of my Facebook friends posted a quote from Rev. Fred Rogers, whom I assume most of you remember as Mr. Rogers of TV neighborhood fame. He was also a Presbyterian minister. He once said, "I believe that appreciation is a holy thing, that when we look for what's best in the person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does; so in appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something truly sacred." Again, it might sound naïve and unrealistic, but honestly isn't it easier to point out someone's faults and weaknesses than to really look for what's best and praiseworthy in that person?

These practices of focusing on what is true and pure and admirable/laudable are things we are all going to need to try to perfect in the weeks and months ahead as we move forward into a new year and a new phase of the life and ministry of this church. Right now emotions are understandably raw and there is still a lot of pain and brokenness that needs healing. But there is also so much in this church that is positive and praiseworthy. So many people who work hard for the mission of this church, extending extravagant hospitality to friends and strangers alike. Feeding hungry neighbors. Providing shelter for homeless neighbors. Standing with and for those who experience discrimination and ostracism on a daily basis. Without being naïve about the hard realities that are facing us we can build on those strengths and attributes to become an even stronger community of faith, and a force for love, grace, peace and justice in this community.

Today is the final day in the liturgical year. Next Sunday is the first day of Advent and the first day of the liturgical year. Just like when we approach December 31, now is a good time to reflect on the past year—what was good and what was bad, ways we've been hurt and ways we've hurt others, what we wish we'd done differently, what we did really well—and start making resolutions for the year ahead. May our resolutions focus on what is "true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly, things to praise, not things to curse." May we open ourselves to giving thanks, and turn our worries into prayers, so that there is room for God to heal us and fill us with peace that goes beyond all understanding.