

Good First  
Phil 4:1-9 sermon

Please pray with me  
Lord, come. Guide us. Open our ears. Thank you,  
Jesus. Amen.

Do you get frustrated when you make a phone call for service and you get voice mail instructions telling you to listen to a menu of options? Press one for...press two for...and half the time you don't even hear what you want? You really just wanted to talk to a person. Even when I scheduled my annual physical I had a menu of options to listen to: press one if you are a new patient, press two if you want billing information, press three if you are renewing a prescription...etc. When it finished I had not heard the option to schedule an appointment. I was trying to figure out what to press to hear the menu again when I accidentally connected with a real person. That was refreshing and she was willing to schedule me.

I understand some banks are talking about having an extra charge if you insist on dealing with a real person. They save so much on using the automatic tellers that they are trying to direct people to the machines, not the teller windows.

When is the last time a real person waited on you at the gas pumps? It's kind of nice when you get to the grocery store and they still offer to carry the

groceries out. We say no, but they did offer! Sometimes I counter with my desire that someone come home with us and put the groceries away. That always gets a smile.

Then there is the social media way of life. You can spend hours with Facebook, twitter, linked-in, communicating with short cryptic phrases. Many prefer text messaging to telephoning. We set up dinner Friday night via text messages with our daughter-in-law. After having worked out the details about which house and who would bring what we got to the third text about time and I was thinking, "Why didn't we just call each other?" 'Course part of my problem is, I'm still using an old style phone without a keyboard and texting is labor intensive.

Technology has created a new way of communicating that some love and some question. However, if we're not careful, we are left with a huge void in our lives. We are missing out on genuine human connections; authentic interactions.

I was exercising at Curves this past week and two other women were on the circuit at the same time. I had not previously met these two. Now, I like to strike up conversations when I exercise. It makes the time go faster and is more fun than just moving from one machine to the next. I believe it makes me work harder too. Like talking while hiking requires more energy.

Neither of these women were talking and I made a few attempts that failed. Finally I complimented one of the women on the shirt she was wearing. It was a really pretty rose color that complimented her well. I told her so and she got a big smile on her face and thanked me for saying so. Then silence. After a bit I commented that they must be nearly finished with their workouts because they had been there before I arrived and I was nearly to the end of the circuit. This time, the woman in the rose colored shirt, said she was nearly to the end and she was pleased because she was recovering from a pulmonary problem and this was the first time she had completed the full workout.

So, I did what I do; what I hope all of us would do. I told her that was terrific and good for her and great job. I complimented her on doing the hard work and not giving up. She got the biggest smile on her face and thanked me. In a few moments she said, “You’re so positive. Is this when you usually come? I want to come when you’re here.” Then she said something about not many people being positive anymore.

I was moved. I also thought, “How sad it that?” This woman will choose a workout time because someone encouraged her and spoke a positive word. I learned her name, Teri, and I repeated it a few times so that I could speak to her if I saw her again.

We live in a time where genuine human connections are scarce and all too often the ones we have are negative.

The Bible tells us that God is love. It tells us that we are created in God’s image. So what is scripture saying to us? We were created to love as God loves. We were created for relationships – authentic relationships. We were created to interact primarily with people – not with machines.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the church at Philippi from prison. He is away from positive human contact. He is missing his friends. He calls them his crown of joy in the preceding verses. He is likening their friendship to the victory wreath, or crown, placed on the head of the winner in Greek athletic games. Here it signifies happiness, honor, victory and pride. His friends mean a lot to him and he misses them with a feeling similar to home sickness.

Yes, Paul is writing to them, an act similar to texting or Facebook, but it is being present with them that Paul misses; just as the woman at Curves needed to connect with a caring person.

In today’s scripture passage Paul describes the attitudinal characteristics that are evident in the lives of those whose faith is in Christ Jesus. He begins by saying “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” Gentleness is more literally ‘forbearance.’ We are to have an attitude that does not seek retaliation. We need to be flexible in conflict. As

Christians, for example, we can sit together in a discussion concerning the Bible and disagree but still respect and love one another. Wouldn't it be great if our two political parties could do that? Gentleness includes flexibility in the face of conflict.

Ok. I admit that is easier said than done. In verses a little later Paul gives us some tools to help us be successful in this.

He adds the phrase, "The Lord is near." This is one of those passages that raises questions. Some assume he means that the return of Christ is imminent. However scholars note that the phrase, "The Lord is near," was a common expression, almost like a greeting. It was not necessarily meant to refer to end times.

Think about the message in, "The Lord is near." Scripture tells us that when we are in Christ Jesus, having chosen to give our lives to him and to accept him as our Lord and Savior, God's presence is with us always. We are assured that we are not alone.

The words from a hymn by St. Patrick of Ireland speaks to this:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me, Christ before me,  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore me,  
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love me,

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Jesus is with us always. The greeting "The Lord is near," is a wonderful reminder to us and knowing God's presence *with* us can help to strengthen us so that we can show gentleness to all.

The key to finding joy and gentleness and peace, the tools to help us to maintain this kind of Christian attitude, are given in verses 6 and 7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Begin with prayer and pray about every situation. Instead of using your energy to worry, pray. Instead of letting the anxiety build in you, pray. And notice, you are to present your prayer and petitions with *thanksgiving*. Think of the difference. Instead of going to God with prayers that begin with a sense of hopelessness, go with thanksgiving. Make your request while giving thanks that you know God is working in the situation. You know God is with you no matter the outcome. You know God has a plan for you, a plan to prosper and not harm you. You know God works for the good of those who believe in him.

Paul says go before God with thanksgiving for all those things while lifting your request. And why? What is the result? The peace of God that *transcends all understanding* will guard our hearts and our minds

in Christ. This is the key to being able to rejoice and relate to others with forbearance. This is the key to finding joy in the Lord. This is the key to being at peace even when things aren't right at work, or the diagnosis isn't good, or the future is uncertain.

A sense of peace does not mean there is not strife or hardship. The peace of constant prayer is a sign of a sense of well-being. It is the feeling that comes when you realize you are in a right relationship with God. You know he is in control and you can rest in that – no matter the chaos around.

Paul then lists qualities, virtues, that he sees displayed in believers who have that sense of God's peace. Focus on "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

The Rev. Martin Pike, Jr., tells this story about himself, "Three minutes had elapsed since I had taken my seat at the counter. Waitresses passed me by; two cooks and a busboy took no notice of my presence. My ego was soothed only because the truck driver seated next to me was ignored as well.

"Maybe this counter is off-limits," I said to him.

"Maybe they are short of help," he responded.

"Maybe they don't want our business," I said.

"Maybe they are taking care of those at the tables," was his reply. The hands on the clock continued to move.

"Maybe they don't like us," I insisted.

"The air conditioning feels so good I don't mind waiting," he said.

At this point, a harried waitress stopped to tell us that the water had been cut off and the dishwasher was not functioning. My nameless compatriot smiled, thanked the waitress and left. I did not like him. Three times I had sought his support for my obnoxious attitude, but he had let me down. Only later did I realize that he had chosen to practice what I preach."

The truck driver chose to focus on the positive and to not be ruffled by the delay. Can we do the same? Can we find the positive, the true, noble, right, pure, trustworthy, and admirable? Do we even try?

Nelson Price gave 15 prominent college professors the challenge of condensing into one brief statement all that books on motivating humans to action had to say. They came up with this:

'What the mind attends to, it considers;

What the mind does not attend it to, it dismisses.

What the mind attends to continually, it believes.

What the mind believes, it eventually does."

An old Quaker story tells about a king who asked for an inventory to be taken of all the flowers in his kingdom.

"He sent out a census taker with a clipboard to count all his flowers. Then he realized that the

information would be of little value to him unless he had something to compare it with. So he called for a second census taker. This one was asked to count all the weeds in the kingdom.

Before long, the first census taker came back, floating into the king's chamber, draped in smiles and warmth. "King, whatever you do, don't ever transfer me or my family out of this kingdom. It has to be the most beautiful kingdom in the world. It is overrun with flowers."

Just then the door slammed and the second census taker came stomping in, threw down his clipboard and demanded an immediate transfer to another land. "King," he shouted, "this has got to be the worst kingdom in the world. It's overrun with weeds. I didn't even get past the drawbridge and I couldn't count all the weeds in this kingdom. I want out!!"

The moral of the story is, that in this life you are going to see what you are looking for, and it will affect your feelings and behavior. If we look for the things that are excellent and good, we will excel and be good. Look for the junk, and you will feel and behave junky."

—Penn Clark, "What you think on will affect you"

When we focus on the positive, we are not only filled with joy and peace, we are able to spread that peace to others. Don't let hurry and worry keep you from being that authentic connection for another. Let your gentleness be evident to others. Make the eye

contact. Offer the smile and kind words. Make the effort to learn the name. Make the tired teller, the bored cashier, the distracted mom, the overworked car mechanic's day with a kind word, a show of interest, a bit of encouragement and thanks. Be one who is seen as 'positive.' Show your Christian spirit of one who is daily, with prayer, seeking to walk with God.

By the way, I have seen Teri again at Curves and she was delighted when I called her by name and asked how she was feeling. When the Curves worker came over to speak to us, I jumped in saying, "Isn't it great that Teri is completing the whole workout after being sick?" Teri just beamed.

And you know, as I helped to bring a smile to her face, I felt my joy increase. Let's be those who make authentic connections in a world starving to have people show they care. Let's be a people who find joy in the Lord through constant prayer; joy that translates to gentleness toward others. Let's be those who keep our minds on the positive and help others to do so as well. And may the peace of Christ reign in us always.

Let us pray

Thank you, Lord, that in all ways your word speaks to us today. Lord, it's easy for us to focus on the trials. Help us to be people who see the good and share our joy with all around us. Thank you for your prompt to notice the positive of the world you've created. Amen.