

November 24, 2019
Central Christian Church, Indianapolis
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Philippians 4:4-9
Think of the Happiest Things

I've got several things I want to talk about this morning: I would like to talk this morning about Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, and also a Canadian TV show that I really like, and a painting project at a Lutheran church in the Bronx, and also about Paul writing letters from his jail cell. Sound okay?

Okay. Let's start with Paul. I promise we'll get to Tinker Bell in a minute. This letter to the Philippians -- we don't exactly know where or when this letter was written, but it does appear that Paul was writing from jail -- he'd been arrested and imprisoned, which happened to him from time to time; it was a dangerous mission to be a Christian in the first century. The church at Philippi hadn't had an easy time of it either. This was probably one of the earlier churches, and probably faced quite a bit of persecution and threat to its very existence. And Paul, as he did for so many churches, was writing in an attempt to encourage them to hang in there, to hold fast to the gospel, to stay true to who they are.

Rejoice, he says, give thanks, God is near, put your trust in God, don't worry about anything...

And my first problem with Paul here is that I'm always skeptical of people who tell me not to worry. I'm a bit of a worrier by nature, and when someone tells me not to worry, I think they clearly have not considered all the facts.

And then he goes on: *And then: 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.*

And my second problem is that Paul doesn't actually tell us what is true, what's honorable, what's just. All of those things seem to be up for interpretation, don't they? We debate what's "just" all the time. And lately we seem to not even to be able to agree on what's "true." And what's pleasing? That's definitely a matter of taste, isn't it? It sounds sort of like Paul is laying out a blueprint for what the church should do -- but there's a fair bit of wiggle room here which seems to make things tricky.

Plus -- I like to argue with Paul -- Plus: What does he mean that we should think about these things?

I imagine the church folks in Philippi gathering around, reading this letter, so excited to hear from their good friend, so fearful of the world outside, so worried about the threats against them... And here is Paul saying *oh, don't worry! Just think about these things!*

Which leads me to Peter Pan. (Obviously.) Remember when Peter is trying to get Wendy, John, and Michael to go with him to Neverland and realizes they don't know how to fly? Tinker Bell sprinkles some pixie dust on them but that's not quite enough, and finally Peter remembers that they have to think happy thoughts -- happy thoughts are the fuel that lifts their feet off the ground and sends them soaring through the London skies and toward the second star to the right and straight on til morning.

And of course as they're flying, they're singing: "Think of the happiest things, it's the same as having wings... Think of all the joy you'll find, when you leave the world behind, and bid your cares goodbye!"

Don't worry, Paul says to the church at Philippi -- think of the happiest things: whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing.... *Think of all the joy you'll find, when you leave the world behind!*

Except, of course, that's not what Paul is saying. His words to the Philippians are an invitation to joy, certainly: *rejoice in the Lord always*, he says... But his letter is not permission to leave the world behind. He is not, I think, channeling Bobby McFerrin in a don't-worry-be-happy kind of way; nor is he suggesting an intellectual exercise in the power of positive thinking. Paul - writing as he does from his jail cell, having been the victim of his own persecution - knows that thinking happy thoughts will not protect his friends in Philippi against the threats bearing down on them.

We know this, too - if you've ever watched a loved one die of cancer, you know you can't think your way to healing. We know that our best thoughts and prayers are not the answer to the ongoing epidemic of gun violence in this country. We know that wishing for peace doesn't make it so, any more than our happiest thoughts could actually make us fly, even if we had access to pixie dust.

None of which is to discount the power of meditation and prayer, to be sure -- these are powerful spiritual tools. But some of us have more privilege than others to bid our cares goodbye, and this is not an invitation to leave the world behind.

So if it's not a naive denial of the pain of the world that leads Paul to encourage these happy thoughts from the church at Phillip, what does he mean? *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is commendable, whatever is pure... think about these things.*

I have fallen in love with a Canadian television show called Schitt's Creek - are you familiar with this? It's gotten very popular in the last year or so, and it's just delightful. I'm only up through season 4, so if you've watched further, don't tell me about it later.... It's the story of this very wealthy family, ridiculously wealthy, who lose all their money in one fell swoop and find themselves living in a rundown hotel in a tiny little town, which is about as far from their old life as they can imagine. There's a lot to love about this show -- the acting is great, the characters are lovable, it's very funny...

One of the characters -- David, the adult son of this family - is played by Daniel Levy, who's one of the writers and creators of the show, and I heard an interview with him awhile back in which the interviewer asked him about the sexuality of the character -- on the show, David dates women and men, and approaches gender in a pretty non-binary way, and eventually ends up in a serious relationship with another man in town. And what's striking about that is that nobody bats an eye. There are no judgy comments. No hate speech. No discrimination. No ostracizing. No exclusion.

Even in this tiny backwards town that seems to be a few decades behind the rest of the world in nearly every other aspect, there's no judgment, no homophobia, nothing that indicates that David's relationship is anything but perfectly normal.

And in this interview I heard, when Dan Levy was asked about why this is, if that wasn't a little bit naive, he said, no, that it was totally intentional, because he wanted to create a world where homophobia wasn't even a thing. He wanted to imagine what it would be like if love was just love. That families were just families who loved each other. He wanted to show people what that could be like.

He's not naive. That's not denial of the way the world actually is.
It's imagining a way the world could be.

That's what I think Paul is talking about. Paul's not telling the Philippians to bid their cares goodbye or to leave the world behind. Paul's not in denial about the way the world actually is. Paul's saying: let's imagine a different way the world could be. Let's imagine a world built on whatever is pure, whatever is just, whatever is commendable, whatever is true... Let's imagine that world and then let's live that way.

I think that's what church is -- we gather here on Sunday mornings and we read ancient words of scripture and we sing about peace even when the world isn't peaceful, and we give thanks even when there doesn't seem to be much to be thankful for, and we work for justice even when justice seems always just out of reach.

We don't do that because we are in denial of the way the world works. We don't come here to escape. We come because the gospel helps us see that the world could be different, that we could be different. We come because we can imagine a new reality and we want to practice that new reality into being.

Heidi Neumark is a writer and pastor in New York City; she wrote a memoir awhile back about her time as a pastor of a church in the South Bronx. It was a tough neighborhood to be a church in -- there was so much need, and so little resources, and violence was a part of life every day. And Heidi tells the story about the front door of the church, which was a frequent target of vandalism -- she would often arrive at church to find something incredibly offensive scrawled in spray paint across the front door.

So she got a paintbrush, and every morning, she would go out and paint over the graffiti. And then it would happen again. And she'd paint over it again. And then she began inviting kids from the neighborhood to come help, and they'd read Bible stories together and illustrate them, not on paper in some Sunday school classroom, but right onto the front door -- big, messy, colorful murals that were no match for the graffiti. And they just kept painting and repainting the door so that they could continue to be the church, to be a beacon of hope in this neighborhood that so dearly needed them to stay.

That's faith, I think. That's commendable and honorable and just and pure. That's imagining a better world and living it.

Or those teachers on Tuesday this week, who came from all over the state -- thousands of them who gathered at the State House and called for better funding and better resources for our schools.. There was little evidence to suggest that their protest would lead to immediate change - - and yet there was a sea of red all over downtown on Tuesday. Not in denial of the way the world is, but because we can imagine a better world.

Paul writes to the Phillippians, and to us, too, to think these happiest thoughts with our feet planted firmly on the ground, in the reality of this broken world.

So we keep on telling these ancient stories, and we keep on singing our songs of peace, and we keep on working for justice, and we keep on giving thanks, and we keep on being the church...

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard our hearts. And oh, what joy we'll find.