

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU THINK

### PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup>I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. <sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

When my mother was sixty, she was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer, and doctors told her she had a 20% chance of living for five years. She had a choice to make; she could wallow in bitterness and focus on the unfairness of her condition, allowing her mind to be flooded with negative thinking and her impending death, or she could focus on all that was good about life and be grateful for all of the blessings she had. She chose the positive thinking route, and her last five years of her life were her happiest years.

This morning's reading from the Apostle Paul sounds as if it were written by a man who was living a care-free life of luxury, free from disease and any of life's conundrums we face on a daily basis; broken dreams, fractured relationships, concerns about finances, burdensome taxes, the future of our children and grandchildren, the health of our economy, safety from terrorism, and the declining health of our planet.

The reality is the writer of Philippians is sitting in a jail awaiting a trial that will soon sentence him to death. Paul's focus is not on his dire situation, but instead his thoughts are motivated by his gratitude for the life that he now has and the relationships with those whom he loves. It may not seem rational to us when Paul says "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice", but for the writer it is the mindset that he has chosen in spite of the troubles he is facing.

He had every reason to complain and shake his fist at God about his dire circumstances, but instead he wrote: "with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." He had every reason to look on the dark side of his condition, but instead he wrote: "whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." He had every reason to give up, but instead he wrote: "I press on... I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Maybe Paul was writing to himself as much as he was to others.

You see, we are not always free to determine what happens to us, but we are relatively free to choose the way in which we respond to whatever happens. In Nathaniel Philbrick's book "Mayflower: A Study of Courage, Community, and War", the author details the first winter the Pilgrim's endured shortly after they settled in Massachusetts. Of the 102 passengers who landed at Plymouth Rock, 42 died the first winter. By the time of the first Thanksgiving, only 53 were left. The

weather was cold and damp; the work was hard; the food supply was inadequate. It was said at one time there were only five grains of corn per person per meal. It was called the "starving time," with sickness and death all around them. I am sure many of them became demoralized and depressed and resentful, but some of them chose to focus on making the most of what they still had, rather than on all they had lost. They concentrated on the positives rather than the negatives, and that helped them make it through the bitter winter to better times.

In those difficult situations in life, we all have the choice of what we will maximize and what we will minimize, and the person who has learned to choose gratitude for the positive in the midst of the negative is far better equipped to cope with whatever comes, and to make the best of things in the worst of times.

But there is another situation in which we have to make a choice. We have to make a choice not only when we go through those difficult days, but also when we go through the good ones, when the harvest is bountiful.

After working long and hard on their farms during the Spring and Summer of that first year, the Pilgrims experienced a bountiful harvest with plenty of food. And once more, they had a choice to make. They could have said, "we've worked hard for it, and we deserve it." But instead they chose to be grateful, and gathered on that first Thanksgiving to give thanks to God for the rich harvest.

It is so easy for all of us to be focused on the negative, on those things in our life that are all wrong, on the seemingly unfairness of life. My mother was a sad and bitter woman for most of her life. Born in poverty in the south during the Great Depression, she was raised on dirt floors and picked cotton with her family. Mom told me once that she had been molested as a child by her alcoholic father, and that her mother nearly died from TB. Forced to work at a young age on a falsified birth certificate, she took a position as a riveter building airplanes during WWII. By the age of 15 she was married and pregnant. By the time she was 28 she had five children, worked fulltime in low paying factories, and moved from port to port due to my father's Navy career. She suffered from major depressive episodes and became a closeted alcoholic.

Never give up on yourself or someone else. Shortly before her terminal diagnoses, my mother began to make changes in her life. She quit drinking and smoking, cold

turkey. She and my father bought an RV and started traveling around North America. They returned to church, one that emphasized God's grace and love. But then the diagnoses. "Would she go back to drinking and become bitter and depressed again?" She had a choice to make. She chose not to worry about the things she could not control. She became more prayerful, putting her trust in God. She became a more forgiving person, letting go of the past and appreciating what she had. She became more generous with her love, her time, and her money.

When you wake up tomorrow morning, remind yourself what a privilege it is to be alive, to be able to breathe, to hear, to see, and to feel. Open your eyes to God's beautiful creation, and see all that God has given you. Do some act of generosity for another person each day, and allow others to be generous to you. What your mind focuses upon will determine how you feel and what you will become. If we think about things that are beautiful, or things that are good, we will live a life where we can rejoice, no matter what our circumstances may be.

Let me close with a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives."