

Whatever is Lovely...

8/22/21

Reading

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 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.

Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon

I wasn't raised in a church. My father was, and had reasons to stay away that he didn't frequently discuss. My mother had, like me, been raised a secular humanist. I have no memories of ever being taken to church on Sunday. So, my childhood was, I think, unusually free of religious influences, either positive or negative.

As I entered young adulthood with no more than casual curiosity about Christianity, most of what I was hearing about it from my extended tribe was decidedly negative. It seemed to me that the essential beliefs of Christianity were characterized by an absurd obsession with the supernatural. God is an old man on a cloud who knows everything about you, and has written a set of arbitrary rules on a stone tablet that he uses to keep score on your behavior. When you die, his tally decides whether you spend a boring eternity playing harps in the sky or boil in agony down below. He's absolutely perfect, but for some reason created a world that isn't. Jesus is God because he was raised from the dead, and we know this because the illiterate peasants he was with at the time told their friends, and eventually someone wrote it down 60 years later. Definitely no one changed a single detail as the story was copied again and again while the church evolved into a political power in the early middle ages.

When I heard "rejoice in the lord!" I wondered what kind of perfect deity would be so conceited to need us to constantly praise him?

When I heard people talking about sin, I wondered what kind of deity would be petty enough to inflict eternal punishment for breaking rules he refused to communicate in person.

It all just seemed like stories of impossibly magical events that, whether they happened or not, have no bearing on life as I experience it. There was no warm, kind, community of Christians in my life to counterweight my intellectual doubts -- the Christians I knew weren't talking about their faith with me, I never asked, and the ones I heard about in the news were busy trying to force everyone else to conform to their rules based on obviously false supernatural premises.

You're probably all familiar with this caricature of Christianity. You may even feel like it accurately describes the beliefs of one or two Christians you've met. But I doubt you feel it's a fair characterization of your own beliefs. I imagine that it entirely misses the core of beauty and truth that brings you to your seat in the pews. You may even be a little offended that I would voice a perspective like that in this holy place.

I assure you that I didn't get up here this morning to express contempt for our shared faith. Hopefully, the fact that I'm here foreshadows that my thinking has evolved a bit. I shared that perspective because it was laced with contempt, and contempt is what I wanted to talk about today, the ways it poisons our hearts and our communities, and how rejoicing in the Lord is the antidote.

Contempt is the feeling that something or someone is beneath consideration, worthless, or deserving scorn. It seems one of the few things everyone can agree on these days is that a rising tide of contempt is damaging our nation and our community. And we're doing a lot of the kind where we heap scorn on someone, rather than simply letting something be beneath our notice. Of course, not as many agree that the contempt itself is a problem, except when those wrong people on the other side direct their contempt at us. Often, we feel that some perspectives, and the people who hold them, are so wrong that open contempt is the only appropriate response. But I disagree, and I think that in today's scripture reading Paul shows us an alternative way.

Paradoxically, the rising tide of contempt in our culture played a big role in my personal journey into faith. Before the 2016 election, I was relatively active on social media. Facebook was my drug of choice, and I felt relatively comfortable engaging in political discussion online with friends and friends of friends. The results of the election were a shocking surprise to me, and like many others, I turned to those online forums to work out what was going on. I was surprised a second time by the shift in tone I encountered there. For the first time, I was attacked by people I agreed with for even engaging "the other side", and accused of legitimating "evil" points of view simply by being curious about them.

I was unprepared for the intensity of ill-will from all sides, and I retreated offline. For me, social media had been a casual way to connect with people, and it no longer felt like the benefits outweighed the risks. And then, a couple of unexpected things happened. First, the absence of social media left a larger hole in my life than I expected. Without a cheap and convenient way to express a political opinion now and then or exchange a few words with distant friends I rarely traveled to visit in person, it became unpleasantly apparent how disconnected I was from the world. I'd recently moved and had no close friends living nearby. I had no role in the community

outside my family and my job. Building a good life for myself and my family had been the main focus of my adulthood, and we were surrounded with blessings, but with everything going on in the world I suddenly felt selfishly out of balance.

Second, in pulling away from the contempt I saw everywhere online, my own contempt was more clearly revealed to me. Though I was never someone who revelled in scoring rhetorical points on Twitter, I still expressed contempt in more private ways. There's a very popular brand of humor that functions by highlighting the contradictions and mean-spiritedness of what "those other people" say and do. Entertainers who peddle this sort of humor go looking for the worst in people: the flimsiest arguments, the biggest hypocrites, the most egregious, self-interested behavior, the basest ignorance. Then they put a little clown hat on it and help you laugh at it. I enjoyed this kind of humor as much as anyone. But it works by arousing contempt. We like it because it momentarily disarms a perspective that feels dangerous and threatening. It allows us to feel safely superior to it, that it's so beneath us it can't be engaged seriously, and the relief that brings makes us laugh. Today, most news outlets operate on the same principle, without trying to be funny.

Feeling disconnected from community, and acutely aware of the poisonous influence of contempt, I had a God moment. I remember vividly, I was by myself, pacing back and forth in the kitchen, freaking out and feeling like the world was coming apart at the seams. Those who know me well know that my anxiety typically manifests as grim silence, but on this rare occasion I was shouting and pounding tables with no one around. And all of a sudden, I heard a voice in my head say: "You have to focus on the best in people", and I felt an immediate return of peace and composure. It was a forceful experience of the holy spirit behind Paul's exhortation: "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."

That voice felt like it came from outside me somehow, but the next thought came swiftly and was my own: "I need to take another look at Christianity." This was partially because some of the incomprehensible perspectives I'd encountered on Facebook had been explicitly Christian, opposed to progressive projects because they usurped the rightful place of God in society. But it was also because I longed for much of what organized religion has to offer: rich community, spiritual development, and a call to service. My contempt had held me back. I thought I knew that you couldn't be part of a Christian community unless you believed in some very specific miracles, and I couldn't see how that was possible. I also worried that being part of a church would associate me with the church's dark side, with the use of christian doctrines to control and manipulate people, to justify abuse and conquest and exploitation.

But this new spirit moved me to set that to the side, and let myself go looking for the best that Christianity has to offer.

Over the next year or two, I sought out conversations with Catholic and Jewish friends about what their faith meant to them, and how they managed to square it with trust in science. They helped me find a number of writers who helped reframe the whole Christian worldview for me. I

read books by Bishop Barron. I read the writings of Martin Luther King with an eye for the Christian foundations of his worldview. I read a bunch of CS Lewis, both his apologetics and his less-well-known Christian space travel novels (those are trippy, I recommend them.) I listened to super-naturalist, fire and brimstone sermons with curiosity, trying to hear the things that made sense without getting hung up on the things that didn't. I showed up for Sunday worship with an open mind.

The result was that, over time, I found new ways of looking at almost every Christian doctrine I had previously found absurd. Ways that rang true, were relevant to my life, and carried deep emotional resonance. Sin, original sin, the holy spirit, the trinity, praising and rejoicing, all of it. Without having to believe in anything more than ordinary magic.

So let's talk about sin for a second. I still think that the notion of God keeping score on us against a secret rule-book is absurd. Original sin, the idea that the moment a baby is born she inherits the collective guilt of humanity and deserves eternal punishment, also still sounds wacky. But God clearly created a world with cause and effect, and where the effects of our actions are frequently not as we would wish. And young children definitely are born with instincts for self-harm - they will happily put their hand on a hot burner or run into traffic if you let them. As a parent, you desperately want them to avoid behaviors that will lead to their destruction. There's nothing arbitrary or petty about that, just a respect for the laws of physics.

The moral universe has cause and effect as well, though the laws are not as crisp or measurable as the laws of physics. Buddhists call this karma. Tich Naht Hanh describes karma as "the seeds we plant in our minds that will bear fruit as suffering or happiness". As we think thoughts and take actions in the world, we're constantly getting feedback from the world. Some of the things we do result in joy, connection, fulfillment, engagement, enduring satisfaction. Others result in disengagement, isolation, anxiety, anger, violence. Bishop Barren calls it "spiritual physics." This is cause and effect, not petty divine retribution. As a parent, God is desperate for us to avoid behaviors that tend to our spiritual destruction.

And what does God want for us instead? I think he wants us to experience deep, enduring joy and satisfaction. And so he wants us to behave in the only ways that can actually bring that about: by putting the needs of others on par with our own, and cultivating delight and gratitude for the world as it is that we are eager to share with others. That is, by rejoicing in God and praising her. CS Lewis said: "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed." You can't really be conceited if you're the source of everything beautiful and good in the world. God's desire for praise is the same thing as his desire for our well being.

I'm not saying that if you go looking for the best in every crazy worldview you encounter, that you will find life-transforming truth. The Gospel is a bit special that way. And I'm not saying all points of view are equally valid. If moral laws exist, some of us must be more aligned with them

than others. But I am saying that, generally, we're not as good at grasping the whole truth as we think we are. I'm saying that, for the most part, people are trying to be good, and they believe the things they believe because there is some core of truth and beauty in it that attracts them. But one of the original sins of our nature is that, once we get a glimmer of the truth, we want to grab it, own it. We want to turn righteousness into a transaction, where we can earn God's rewards by completing a concrete checklist of activities. Exhausted by a complex and uncertain world, we desire the comfort of simple answers; a respite from trade-offs; an end to debate. And so we start building up our defenses against anything that would muddy the waters. We work very hard to shut out any information, or any person, that would force us to encounter the dark side of our truth.

We don't want to grapple with the idea that the founding fathers created institutions and systems of law that are an enduring source of freedom, growth, and prosperity for many, but were also racists who put in place systems of oppression that are still holding back millions of our countrymen today. We don't want to think about how government policies that help millions avoid poverty and find a path to a better life can also breed dependence, fuel corruption, and undermine liberty. We don't want to think about how self-righteous and hypocritical we can seem to others when we are defending something we fiercely believe in. We don't want to know that anything we did with good intentions harmed someone who didn't deserve it.

And so, very often, we reach for contempt to shield ourselves. But that kind of contempt is a sin, a seed we plant in our mind that bears fruit as suffering. CS Lewis said: "That is the devil getting at us. He always sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. And he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is the worse. You see why, of course? He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one."

The message here is not that we can never know anything for sure, so we should just stay home and let "God's will be done". That's just another flavor of totalizing one aspect of the truth. We are called to a life of self-sacrificing service, to open ourselves up to uncertainty, to acknowledge our sinful nature and repent, and we are called to take up this path joyfully. Because that is the narrow path, the only path, to joy and enduring satisfaction. So, *Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 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.*

Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.