



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 23, 2017

"Jesus-Centered Contentment" (How to Pray Series)

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

(A clip from "Finding Nemo" was shown to illustrate the different ways people handle adversity.)

I love that clip from Finding Nemo. I think that could be my favorite Pixar movie, at least so far. So who are you more like today? Dory, the blue fish with short-term memory loss, or her friend Marlin, the little clown fish who is searching for his lost son Nemo?

Dory and Marlin have teamed up to look for Nemo. Turtles and pelicans and now a whale are all working to help them get to Marlin's son. But what a contrast! Dory is a fish at peace. Marlin is a nervous wreck. Dory passes the time by riding the currents inside a huge blue whale. She believes something good will come out of the situation they're in.

Marlin doesn't share her optimism. He's too busy bashing his head against the inside of the whale in a futile attempt to change his circumstances. Dory is open to experiment and to explore. She even tries to speak whale. Marlin is nervous. He's terrified that anything they do might upset their world's delicate balance. Dory is willing to listen and trust.

Marlin is convinced that only bad things are ahead for them. Dory is open to learn. Marlin is convinced it's all up to him to figure things out and solve his problems. Dory is willing to let go of control. Marlin can't let go of his own ingenuity or give up on his own abilities to work his way out of his predicament -

until he has no choice but to trust. So who are you more like today? Dory or Marlin?

In the passage we're going to look at this morning, the apostle Paul, the person who wrote a good chunk of the New Testament, says something pretty amazing to his friends in Philippi, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." (Philippians 4:11) He calls what he's learned about contentment a secret.

He's learned the secret to contentment and knowing that secret enabled him to remain calm no matter how crazy his life became. And believe me, Paul's life was CRAZY! I don't know about you but I want to know his secret to contentment. I want to know how I can live a life where I regularly experience deeper peace even when my circumstance are not what I'd hoped they might be.

Tim Keller, the former pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York once said that we live in a paint mixer world. Have you ever been to Home Depot and watched them combine different paints to create the exact color a customer wants? A couple of paint colors are poured into to the same paint can and then that can is place in this contraption that just shakes it like crazy until it's all thoroughly mixed.

Keller says, "That's the kind of world we live in." We live in a world that is full of turbulence. Everything is

constantly changing. Every day our world presents us with all sorts of things for us to be anxious about. We see unresolved conflicts between friends and family members. We face uncertain financial challenges. We live in a world that can, at times, seem increasingly dangerous. Friends move away. Jobs change. Medical diagnoses strike fear in our hearts. And all of that creates incredible turbulence in our lives.

What Paul discovered is that sometimes the turbulence in our lives might not change. So what he realized is that he needed more effective internal stabilizers to help him navigate what ever challenges he faced. When Paul was writing this letter he was in prison, facing a death sentence. So, how could he write about the peace he was experiencing when he was facing an uncertain future? What made Paul the rock that he was?

Airplanes and ships have stabilizers build in to keep things stable when the air or the sea their moving through is boiling. The more turbulent the environment, the stronger the internal stabilizers need to be. We need deep, strong, effective stabilizers. Paul seems to have discovered the secret to having stabilizers like that in his life. He built his life on a great truth but it was more than just a great idea. And that truth led him to a practice that changed who he was. And that transformation began to give him the internal stabilizers he needed to steady his life.

Let's look at what Paul says here in Philippians 4:1 "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."

Whenever you see the word "therefore" in the Bible, you should ask yourself, "What is the word 'therefore' there for?" Paul says to his friends in Philippi it is possible to stand firm in the face of life's challenges. We can be steady in a paint-mixer world. But how?

We don't have to go far to find what Paul is talking about. Just rewind the text a few verses. Philippians 3:20-21. Here's the cosmic truth Paul built his life upon: He writes, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself."

Paul grounded his life in cosmic stuff. He tells us that if we want to be able to stand firm in a turbulent world, then he challenges his fellow disciples to remember that we belong to Jesus. Remember that your citizenship is actually in a different realm. Paul knows that when we look at our turbulent lives everything seems to be changing. When we look around us, the world is unstable, unpredictable, even threatening at times. Nothing seems to last.

But what he is pointing us to is the fact that there is indeed a place and there is a Person who is the king of a realm where things don't just stay the same. There is a place where things get stronger, they get newer, brighter, fresher with every passing second. He points to Jesus Christ, the one who is the king of that realm and he reminds us that we are citizens of that kingdom.

So the secret to Paul's contentment is not just a great idea with cosmic implications. The secret to Paul's

peace in his life is a relationship with a person. Jesus Christ, himself, was Paul's secret to contentment. In the face of incredible opposition, while being on the receiving end of numerous acts of injustice, Paul discovered that he had everything he needed. He could live a life filled with contentment and peace. He was able to live that way not because he had learned how to be independent and self-reliant, which is the kind of advice our culture tends to give us.

His contentment and peace came because he has learned to be totally dependent on Jesus. And, as we'll see in a moment, it was in prayer that he discovered the intimate relationship with a God who loved him and that discovery, that relationship with God, changed him.

So, here's what Paul does. He takes this huge truth that he has discovered and uses it even in the little places in his life. He applied that cosmic truth to mundane, everyday circumstances. His first case study shows up in verse 2 of Philippians 4:

"I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 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."

Two people were in conflict in the church in Philippi. What does Paul do first? He points them back to the great truth that both of them belong to Jesus and are citizens of a heavenly kingdom where things don't just stay the same but are becoming ever new. That is true for both of these people in conflict with one another. Remember who you are. Start there and then work out your disagreement. Philippians 4 verse 4:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 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."

Paul's secret to contentment begins when he remembers the cosmic truth about who he is. He belongs to Jesus Christ. And then, as he spends time with God in prayer, his life is transformed.

Today, we start a sermon series on how you and I can have this same kind of deep, intimate, life-transforming relationship with God. Over the next few months we're going to learn how to pray, we going to discover deeper intimacy with God. We're going to see God do amazing things in our lives as we get to know God better as we pray.

Bill Hybels says some pretty interesting things about prayer in his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, "I have come to know God a whole lot better since I slowed down to pray. I have been astonished by his approachability, endeared by his care, stilled by his presence, encouraged by his affirmation and challenged by his insatiable desire to make the truth known. Nothing compares to this type of firsthand knowledge of God...As you grow in prayer, God will reveal more of himself to you, breathing more of his life into your life. Mark my words: this will be the most fulfilling and rewarding part of your experience with prayer, more so than your diligence or even his faithfulness. Accepting, trustworthy, peace filled, grace giving-these character traits of God will be made more vibrant to you as you devote yourself to cultivating a life of prayer."

Paul's secret to contentment in his paint-mixer world was that he simply knew God and as he got to know, not just more information about God, but got to know God personally, God changed his life.

God filled him with internal stabilizers that enabled him to face whatever came his way.

And now let's listen to what Paul recommends that we do to build on the cosmic truth he built his life on.

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. 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. (Phil 4:8-9)

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil 4:10-13)

Dory or Marlin? Who are we going to be more like? Will we continue to be gripped by anxiety or will we continue to learn to entrust ourselves to our faithful Savior even in the face of situations we can't understand or change?

Finally this morning, let's look at a case study from his Paul's own life that will give us a glimpse into what all of this looks like in real life. The apostle Paul was one of the people who started the church in Philippi. And the process of planting that church was turbulent.

Paul and his friends started this church while they were on Paul's second big church planting expedition across what is today modern-day Turkey and Greece. Luke, the author of the Book of

Acts, tells us about how God led Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke on what was, at times, a confusing, difficult, intense, exhilarating journey into the heart of God's will for their lives.

God's guidance came to this team through roadblocks, through a vision. and through prayer. God used detours and a positive vision to lead these guys right into what he wanted them to do. I don't know about you but I'm super interested in knowing what God wants me to do with my work and in my relationships. The route these guys took to figure out what God's wanted them to do was anything but clear and straight. That's encouraging to this disciple of Jesus who sometimes feels like he is stumbling his way through portions of his life.

When Paul and his team headed out on their journey Luke, writing in the book of Acts says that the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from going to various places. The text doesn't give us any details. All we know is that things did not work out the way they'd planned.

So, they moved north out of the Roman province of Asia to Bithynia but there too the Spirit of Jesus stopped them. We don't know how the Spirit of God did that. All we know is that they were prevented from working the plan THEY had in mind. God had something else for them to do.

It was after hitting a series of roadblocks that Paul and his friends headed in the only direction that remained open to them. It's true, they could have done a 180 and gone home. They could have thrown in the towel. They could have come to the conclusion that they were on an ill-fated journey. But they didn't do that. They moved forward, trusting that God was at work. That's evidence of internal stabilizers at work in their lives.

They headed west to the port city of Troas on the Aegean Sea. And it

was in Troas that Paul received positive guidance through a vision he had in the middle of the night. He was in prayer and God spoke to him. How many times have you found yourself up in the middle of the night?

Most of time when we're up in the middle of the night we're awake because we have too much on our minds. We're struggling to figure out what we should do when the sun comes up in the morning. In Paul's middle of the night prayer, he has a vision. He saw a man from Macedonia, that's the province in Greece where Philippi was located. That man called to Paul, "Come on over here and help us."

That's all Paul and his friends needed. They immediately set sail from Troas to Neapolis and from that port city they walked the remaining 10 miles to Philippi. It was a turbulent journey and the only reason they reached Philippi was because they had the necessary internal stabilizers that enabled them to navigate all the challenges they faced.

If Paul's life is any indication of how God sometimes leads us into his will, there are a couple of things I take away from Paul's experience. The first lesson is a simple one: pay attention. Pay attention to where God is not only saying "Yes". Pay attention to where God is saying, "No! Not that way." Paul was a person who was able to take "No" for an answer.

Being able to take, "No" for an answer is essential for discerning God's will. We need to be able to recognize a roadblock, especially a roadblock or a detour put there by God himself. That roadblock is there for a reason. God wants to use that barrier to guide us into the heart of his will. Be able to take "No" for an answer.

The second thing I learn from Paul's experience is that in discerning God's will I need to spend time of waiting on God.

Paul keeps moving as he caroms off these roadblocks but he also waits, listens, and quiets his mind and heart so he can hear both the “No’s” and the positive vision God has for his life. Paul found his way by sitting in silence before the Lord in prayer and acting on God’s clear, positive guidance. And he did all of that in relationship with other followers of Christ who were also listening with Paul for God’s direction.

Paul says, “I have learned the secret of being content whatever I have.” Could it be that our greatest challenges in our lives are not the circumstances we’re facing, as scary as they might be? Could it be that our greatest need is the need to cultivate the internal stabilizers God wants to have to enable us to fly safely through the turbulence of our lives?

Paul grounded his identity and the understanding of his life not in his circumstance but somewhere else. He built his life on the great truth about who he was in Christ. He belonged to God. And as he moved forward, trusting this God, as he grew in his relationship with God in prayer, Paul discovered the Jesus-centered secret to contentment which enabled him to face every challenge that came into his life. Learning more about how to cultivate our relationship with God in prayer so that we might have these same internal stabilizers in our lives, is the journey of discovery we now embark on together.