



November 2015 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

I thank my God every time I remember you... (Philippians 1:3).

This year I am inviting you to reflect on portions of Paul's letter, *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1b)*, as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Relying heavily on the writings of Fred Craddock and of David Lose, each article will include a brief reflection on a Scripture passage, questions for reflection and discussion, and a prayer. I encourage you, as we begin, to read Paul's letter in its entirety in one sitting; remembering as you read that this is a letter – of Paul – to a church.

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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. Philippians 4:8-9

Paul's final encouragement is deceptively simple: think on what is right, on what is good, on what is best. That's about it. Simple, indeed.

Yet also powerful. I am regularly amazed at how much what we think about shapes how we feel. We all have a mixture of memories, some of good things, some of difficult. Some of successes, others of regrets. Some of what we are proud of, others of what most shames us. The memories that we choose to dwell on shape not only our view of the past but dominate our present and largely define our future.

What we think about sets, in many ways, the boundaries of what we can imagine. And so Paul invites the Philippians to shape their imaginations – individually and collectively – around those things that are honorable, just, true, and commendable.

What would it take for us to do the same? As individuals, what would it be like to practice thinking about what is just and pleasing while at work or school, or about what is commendable and true while at home? How might that shape how we interact with those around us? How might encouraging each other to think about what is praiseworthy shape our relationships?

And what about as communities of faith? Can we imagine that our congregations are places that lift up before us what is honorable, inviting us to be inspired by and promote the beauty and integrity of this life we share?

It takes time, of course, to practice to acquire the skill of thinking on what is honorable and true because, by and large, our culture does not encourage us in this direction.

Can you imagine, for instance, the evening news being dominated by a series of stories about what is pleasing and commendable? Sure, perhaps the occasional “character story” near the end of the program to leave us on a high note, but for the most part the news is dominated by the axiom “if it bleeds it leads.” Or what about the commercials that sponsor the evening news and all the other television programs we watch? They definitely don’t invite us to think on what is honorable and true; rather they focus our attention on what we lack, inviting us to think about what we don’t have and about our insufficiencies and deficits. Why? Because these things induce us to buy. Honorable and true don’t sell any more than pleasing and commendable grab our attention. This doesn’t mean we need to shun popular media but that we do need to cultivate the practice of thinking beyond what we see on billboards and screens so that we might contemplate those things that we most value.

Paul, you see, recognizes that what we spend the most time thinking about shapes, over time, who we are, what we see, what we can imagine, and therefore what we can do.

And so he invites us to raise our sights so that we may be inspired – and transformed – by what is best in this life, for as we do this we will experience ever more fully the peace of the God who created and gave us all those good things in the first place.

Read and Reflect: Philippians 4:8-9

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, “I wonder about...”, or, “I noticed...”

Comment on the following: *It takes time, of course, to practice to acquire the skill of thinking on what is honorable and true because, by and large, our culture does not encourage us in this direction.*

Comment on the following: *Paul...recognizes that what we spend the most time thinking about shapes, over time, who we are, what we see, what we can imagine, and therefore what we can do.*

Pray together: *Gracious God, help us to fasten our eyes on what is best in this life and to allow these thoughts to shape our words and deeds throughout the day. Amen.*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Philippians 4:23).

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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Spirit -Led Leadership - Hope-Filled Discipleship - Innovative Tradition - Collaborative Partnerships