

More Than Good Manners

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Philippians 4:1-9 and Matthew 22:1-14

However you are dealing with things right now, bless you. I talk to many of you – on the phone, on Zoom, in person under the tent and masked, and the narratives are very similar.

- A weariness.
- An “I’m doing OK and I can’t complain, but...”
- An anxiousness, perhaps.
- An acknowledgement that your health is relatively fine, and that you have the resources you need, and, at the same time, you dearly miss seeing loved ones or you miss this or you miss that.
- If you have children at home, or if you are working at home under stressful circumstances, a deep fatigue, and almost existential sense of exhaustion.

Not for all of you. Or not all the time. And a some time kind of guilt that you know others have it worse, as some do.

Maybe I am projecting and maybe I am not. But your feelings and experiences are your feelings and experiences, and so however you are dealing with things, bless you.

I hope you can find ways to share your feelings, with a loved one, a counselor, one of us. I hope you can find ways to exercise your body, to do whatever you need to do to step away from what seems like an endless season with no end in sight.

Because so much is going on, and so much of it heightened. You know the litany well, but perhaps it’s helpful to name it. COVID-19 – with so many ripples and implications. I saw a casual acquaintance the other day. He had tested positive but was asymptomatic. His wife, however, had been ill for more than five months.

Whether her diagnosis is fatal or not, five months is a long time. We all have those stories.

And an election to happen in 23 days, an election that's already begun. I can only encourage you to vote, if you haven't. It is a civic duty and it is a sacred duty. I believe that all presidential elections are consequential – this one certainly is.

Not to be partisan, of course, and barely political, but an election that matters because of COVID, because of a range of responses to racism and white supremacy, because of economic uncertainty, is not only politically and culturally consequential, but is weighing on us individually and collectively very heavily, regardless of party affiliation. Social media is not helping all of this, though it can be helpful at times.

Truth is, it's difficult to talk about these things at all, because it feels right now that either we are talking into an echo chamber where everyone thinks and speaks and acts similarly to us, or we yell at and discuss whoever the "other" might be with little chance of commonality, even a civil conversation. The granular nature of our life is not helping all of us, each of us watching our own TV, fewer common experiences.

So, as I said at the outset, however you are dealing with things, bless you.

Next week we will launch our 2021 stewardship effort. Seminary really doesn't teach you much about stewardship; it certainly doesn't teach you much about stewardship in a pandemic! Your Stewardship Committee has chosen a theme – you should receive a letter this week – that seeks to acknowledge our current complicated and challenging reality. "Walking in Faith," based on a verse from Second Corinthians, reminds us that we do walk in faith, even when physically the next steps are not clear, are shaky, are uncertain. That is to say, who knows that the next steps of COVID will be, for each of us, for all of us.

Two steps forward and three steps back seems like an operative mode. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said that "Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase." That is what we are talking about – walking in faith, which presumes that faith matters in this moment, that something about what we believe and the community in which that belief plays itself out matters, even when that community can't fully gather in person.

For me right now, and perhaps for you, faith has been many things. It has been a comfort when things seem difficult, for me, for those I love, for you. And it has been a provocation, a welcome provocation, convicting my satisfaction with the status quo, or the false sense that doing a little is enough.

Walking in faith, and believing that faith can serve as a formative force for each of us and all of us, that shapes our souls and our hearts and our relationships and our actions.

If faith doesn't form us, reform us, transform us, then something is wrong – not with faith itself, but with our understanding of it. It needs to comfort us, yes, in particular at difficult times, but it also needs to provoke us – the old adage “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” comes to mind. And it can. And it does, when we are open to the Spirit, when we are open to being formed by the word that we encounter.

And here's at least one point I want to make about what it means to be the church when all of this is swirling around – COVID, racism, economic uncertainty, an election. The church (and when I say “the church” I mean both the big church out there of which we are a part and the particular church that is The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill) can either reflect, be consumed by, these uncertain and anxious times, including deep levels of conflict and division, or it can be something altogether different, an ethical community of grace, who, rather than either taking sides on difficult issues and demonizing those who disagree, or ignoring them altogether, engages those issues, those difficult or awkward conversations, faithfully, respectfully, modeling to and for each other and modeling for the world what Paul calls “a still more excellent way.”

It can be difficult, to be sure, and much of church history is dotted with failed attempts. But it can happen, not magically, not by luck, but through trust and reliance on the Spirit.

Scripture gives us examples of what it can look like, a community of faith marked by more than good manners, a fellowship defined by more than politeness – though that wouldn't be so bad right now – but a body formed by a deeper set of values and principles and behaviors so that it can make a difference for its members and then make a difference in the life of the world.

Paul, writing to a small, struggling church in Philippi, a church struggling to figure out how to be church, and how to be church in a culture not keen to accept it, a church looking to make its mark, establish its norms. Paul writes to them, from a distance, first acknowledging their leaders – their women leaders – and then urging the entire community toward a vision of mutual support. If they live in that way, if they live in gentleness toward one another, if they seek not to be anxious, they will know the peace of God, which, to Paul, “passes all understanding.” That’s what we want, right? Gentleness that leads to peace.

Paul continues with a litany of values that will give form and shape to the community’s life: truth, honor, justice, purity, beauty. Focus on these things. They would have been familiar qualities to a people awash in Greek philosophy, but Paul places them in a context where Jesus’ peace surpasses all else, and re-calibrates human life and communal life.

Challenges will still exist. Disagreements will still happen. But do this, Paul says, live like this, and God’s peace will be with you. Live like this, Jacob Myers writes, “turning our sight from earthly matters that lead to petty squabbles, derision, and anxiety,” and we can experience the peace that transcends all understanding.

William Loader writes: “Paul is not just advocating the power of positive thinking. This about more than technique and persuasion. It is about filling one's mind with what Paul sees as the signs of God's life - not so that will feel good, but because this is another way of filling oneself with God's life and so allowing God's life to flow through us to the world around us.”

To return to where we started. However you are living with things, however we are living with things, may God bless us. History has provided us with many moments filled with uncertainty and anxiety, and this is certainly one of those. Might we rely on our faith, lean on and lean into our faith, for our own benefit and for the benefit of our broken and fearful world?

H. Richard Niebuhr writes that “The world is sometimes enemy, sometimes partner of Church, often antagonist, always one to be befriended; now it is the co-knower, now the one that does not know what the Church knows, now

the knower of what Church does not know.” (*The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*)

The church is not perfect by any means, and often very far from it. What we have, what we know, is this: that there is a different way, a better way, by which we can live together, and by so living, when we do, can make a difference in the world, a vision and a gift, gentleness, among other things, truth, justice. They will all lead to peace, deep peace, true peace, that will form and reform and transform hearts and souls and communities, and even this world that God loves so much. Amen.