

Late at night, when you lie in bed unable to sleep, the clock on the nightstand becomes your Grand Inquisitor. You toss and turn a bit, try to calm yourself down, and then try just keeping your eyes closed. But eventually, you roll over, open your eyes, and surrender to the illuminated numbers. 2:01...2:02....2:03. You think about the work you have to get done, or the new spot you found on your arm. You think about your financial anxieties. Then you think about your grown daughter: “She’s not really going to marry that guy, is she?” 2:04...2:05...2:06. Maybe your worries are not so dramatic. Maybe the problem is that there is no dramatic call in your life, or no relationship or dream that either inspires or conflicts you. 2:07...2:08. And it feels like the clock is silently screaming that you are running out of time.

During the daylight hours, when you are allowed the narcotic of business, you can stay numb and avoid your fears. But late at night when you are alone and undefended by distractions the anxieties return like monsters under the bed. Through all my years of pastoral ministry I have never argued someone out of their fears or anxieties. I can’t even argue myself out of my own fears. Arguments are based in logic, but fear is an emotion which just doesn’t care about logic. As any child knows, when you are afraid of the dark, the only thing that can help is when someone you love and trust comes running to embrace you. That’s why the Apostle Paul says, “The Lord is near.”

It was an anxious time for the Church in Philippi to whom Paul wrote our scripture text today. We don’t know all the reasons why, but that doesn’t really matter. It’s always an anxious time. In the words of the historian Martin Marty, “The world is always coming to an end.”

I grew up during the Cold War, when some people were building bomb shelters in their backyards. We would regularly have air-raid drills in our public schools when we were told to sit under our desks, as if that would protect us from a nuclear holocaust. Eventually we outgrew thinking we could be protected, but we didn’t outgrow the anxiety which persists with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, which are now spreading to more countries that are not nearly our allies. The anxieties also persist over the climate crisis, economic volatility and the high interest rates, the intense social polarization, and with whatever next strange virus may again disrupt the world. These are our current reasons for staying up at night afraid of what is out there in the dark, but the study of history reveals that people have always been afraid of what may happen.

Down through the ages, when Christians gather into their church communities, they bring these anxieties with them. Sometimes the anxieties are about the future of their congregations. Sometimes it’s just because we live in anxious times, and when we get to church we can’t help but spread a little anxiety around. One of the ways this anxiety manifests itself is through conflict. And the emotional driver behind most of our conflicts is fear.

Two of the women at First Church Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, had developed an argument with each other. We don’t what the conflict was about. That’s not surprising since we typically remember the people, the hurt, and the fallout better than we do the issues. If their argument was like most church conflicts people had probably taken sides, and there was a lot a chatter about it over coffee after worship.

Notice how Paul responds to this conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. He doesn’t say who’s right or wrong, scold the church, blame the last pastor of the congregation, even offer our favorite response which is to ask for more information about the conflict. Also known as gossip. Instead, Paul brings these two women back to center by urging them “to have the same mind in the Lord.” Both of them know Jesus Christ as the God who’s come rushing to us in the dark to love the fear out of us. So they are united in Christ, which means they are united to each other, for Christ is at the center of their relationship.

The Jewish Theologian Martin Buber claimed that the Creator who shoved aside the darkness to make room for light and beauty can be found when two humans made in God's image come together. As long as they are together, a holy creative space exists between them. Anything is now possible. But if one leaves, they take away the creative space with them. And when we leave the Creator the only place to return is back to the darkness.

Jesus said something quite similar in saying that when two or three gather in his name, he is always in their midst as the Savior. But when our anxiety turns to blame and conflict, and we are tempted to just wander away, we are not just leaving each other, but also the Savior who can only be fully known in community. The church is not held together by uniformity or agreement. Its unity is held together by the center, who is Jesus Christ. This is what we mean when we call ourselves an inclusive church. It doesn't just mean we welcome people of all races, genders, orientations, politics and ideology. It means we have a model for holding diversity together, which is a unique thing in our society. We define the church not by its boundaries, but by its common center in Christ. And that center can always hold.

When we come as a diverse people to this Communion Table to receive a taste of the grace of God's love, we are made gentle. Gentle with ourselves, and gentle with each other. So "let your gentleness be known to everyone," The Apostle says in our text.

For Paul gentleness has nothing to do with weakness. In fact, he would say only the strong can be gentle. The world doesn't need more weakness from the church. It already has plenty of that. What the world needs is for the church to truly believe a strong Savior is near, and to throw ourselves into his ongoing work that is not done.

Paul goes on to remind Euodia and Syntyche, and the rest of the church, that we have a mission and it's time to strive not with each other, but side by side for the Gospel. But we can only engage in what is truly Christ's work if we are clear about the power of gentleness.

Why did Dr King and the civil rights marchers keep gently walking through fire hoses and barking dogs? Because in their churches they had discovered a vision of justice that they knew would overcome. Why did Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent resistance succeed in India? Because he knew the power of gentle but relentless resistance to injustice. How did Nelson Mandela survive twenty-seven years in prison before becoming the first Black president of South Africa? In his autobiography he says it was because he never stopped hearing the songs of freedom in his heart.

As the Apostle Paul is writing to the Philippians he is also in jail. And that was after being thrown out of half of the cities of the Roman empire, often with a shower of rocks behind him. He had learned if you are going to do anything with life that is worthwhile, you are going to meet with opposition. He has also learned the only way to keep moving is to be unafraid. And the only way to be unafraid is to believe the Lord is near.

You can tell the people who are truly strong and unafraid because they are centered, and thus, gentle. It is always the bullies who are afraid. And the bullies who are leaders try to make us afraid.

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone, because the Lord is near." As the restless nights pile up, and as you behold all that has been sprayed across the canvas of your life, remember that the Lord Jesus Christ was always more near than you saw. And this is a Savior who is always ready to redeem. Anything. Paul believes that made him strong in the grace of the Lord. And the strength freed him to be gentle. These are among his last words, so they are something of the legacy he wanted left behind about his life.

Is that also going to be your legacy? Is that what your friends and family would say about you? Would they call you a gentle person? Is this the legacy of the church today? It could be. It all depends on whether or not we really believe the Lord is near. Amen.