

WHAT DOES “MARANA THA” MEAN?

(05/24/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Philippians 4:1-9
 Matthew 22:1-14

“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.”

(Philippians 4:4-7)

Today is the sixth Sunday after Easter (the seventh Sunday of the Easter season). It is also the eleventh Sunday that, because of the restrictions on public gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic, we have not been able to meet as the gathered church for Sunday morning worship.

The epistle reading that I chose for this reflection is a passage from Paul’s letter to the Christian church he had founded at Philippi. The Roman colony of Philippi, one of the principal sites of Macedonia, had been evangelized by Paul in 50 A.D. during his second missionary journey. His converts there had proven themselves faithful by supporting his later ministry at Thessalonika and Corinth.

At the time of the writing, Paul is under arrest. In his letter, he shares some news of his travels. He warns the Philippians against the “bad workmen” who are undermining his work in other churches. Above all, he appeals for unity and humility. He reminds his readers of the humility of Christ in terms that leave little doubt that the early church believed in the divine pre-existence of Jesus. This theme is later articulated more fully in the Gospel of John, which was written 50-60 years after this letter. The opening passages of John maintain that the Word of God who was present from the beginning with God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and dwelt among us.

Paul is friendly, supportive, and encouraging in his letter. He has a warm spot in his heart for the members of the church at Philippi. They are living proof that his ministry was not in vain. The thought of them fills him with gladness.

As a pastor, I can understand how Paul felt. A pastor should not become attached to results, to what the Reverend William Rees, my field education supervisor while I was in theological school, called “secular standards of success.” By this he meant primarily numbers

and money. A pastor should put just as much time and effort into his/her sermon whether there are six people attending worship, sixty, or six hundred. Yet it would be difficult in a small church like ours not to read sixty as an affirmation of one's preaching. It is also difficult not to read six as a judgment that Sunday worship, for most people, isn't worth the effort to attend. We can't judge our success as a church by the number of active members and the amount pledged in our stewardship campaign. Yet it is difficult not to rejoice when we receive new members or people make a faith commitment to stewardship.

Paul, like any pastor, reminds his people "to be the best that they can be." The United States Army uses this slogan in its advertising. The implication is that the armed forces can help you be all that you can be. Although I know serving in the armed forces can help a person grow in many ways, I think this slogan is especially applicable to the church. The church reminds us, encourages us, challenges us to be the best that we can be. Paul tells us we can do this if we stay focused on the purpose and goal of not only the church, but also our lives: to deepen our relationship with God through Christ and live out the implications of our faith in our daily lives.

Paul reminds the Philippians that "the Lord is near." There is little doubt that in this phrase, Paul is referring to the Second Coming, the return of the Lord in power and majesty. The early church, in their interpretation of some of Jesus' sayings, assumed that this Second Coming was to be a cosmological event, the end not only of the world and that age but also of time. They believed this apocalyptic event would happen within their lifetime.

It obviously did not happen, at least in the way they expected. There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, the prediction of what has, somewhat derisively, been called "the great non-event" may have been mistaken with regard to the actual date. Numerous religious groups throughout history have predicted other dates. We saw this twenty years ago when we moved from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. People seriously believed the end of the entire universe was about to happen. None of these predictions, and there have been many, has turned out to be correct.

The other possibility is that the second coming is not an outward cosmological event but an inner spiritual event. It happens when the Holy Spirit enters our lives and transforms them, bringing an end to what Paul called the "old person" and giving birth to the "new person," to a new life in Christ.

The Aramaic words which are translated in our Bible as “the Lord is near” are *Marana tha*. These words may refer not to a time in the future, but to a distance or the lack of a distance. The Lord may be very near to us, nearer to us than we are to ourselves. The Gospel of Thomas tells us that the Word is very near to us, that the kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth, but we do not see it. In this gospel, Jesus says, “Raise the stone and you will find me; cleave the wood and there I am.”

The King James Version and the Revised Standard Version translate *Marana tha* as “the Lord is at hand.” The Jerusalem Bible translates it as “the Lord is very near.” I believe the presence of God in the world and in our lives is a central tenet of our faith. If we have a sense of God’s presence in our lives, a sense that no matter what we do or how far we stray we are never outside the realm of God’s presence, of God’s love, we have the foundation for a deeply spiritual life.

Remember the words of the 139th psalm:

*Where shall I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle in the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Paul tells his people to remember that the Lord is near to them. He tells them to practice their faith in gentleness, even in times of disagreement, *especially* in times of disagreement. Paul is saddened and disturbed by the conflict between two of the women of the church. Like any pastor, he hates to see the body of Christ torn apart by personality conflicts and differences of opinion that cannot be charitably resolved. He tells them to think positive, to follow his example.

In the passage we read this morning, Paul gives his followers in Philippi six guidelines for them as individuals and as a church.

First, Paul tells the Philippians and us to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” He tells us to find our joy in Christ, not in secular or materialistic pursuits, in pleasures that will fade. He reminds us of what should be the central value of our life and the only path to true happiness.

Second, Paul tells the Philippians and us to “Be gentle.” That is good advice for many of us. Be gentle not only with other people, but also and especially with yourself. Be gentle in thought, word, and deed. Be gentle with life and be gentle with the earth as you walk through it.

Third, Paul tells the Philippians and us, “Don’t worry.” Anxiety is like a little stream that, if left unattended, becomes a channel into which every other feeling eventually begins to flow. Anxiety can consume your life. It is wise to think through decisions we need to make and relationships we experience as troubled. Obsessing or ruminating is counterproductive. It just keeps us up at night and wears us down.

Paul tells us to have a little faith, a little trust. If we don’t have an attitude of faith and trust, we will have a desire for control. We will try to control other people--what they think about us, feel toward us, and how they treat us. Trust me, no matter how much power we have or think we have, we cannot do this. Anxiety and the need for control puts us at odds with ourselves, with our brothers and sisters, and with life.

This is a central dimension of Christian stewardship. We should give freely, generously, lovingly as an outward expression of our faith. Fear leads us to hold on to what we have, to grasp, to hoard. Jesus addresses this very human tendency in several of his parables.

Jesus warns us not to store up treasure on earth. He tells us we don’t need to build bigger barns. He tells us to sell our stuff and give to the poor so we can have treasure in heaven. He tells us to let go of our attachments.

Fourth, Paul tells us to pray. He tells us to bring our cares and concerns before God. God may not solve our problems or remove our burdens; God may help us view them differently, help us put them in perspective. God will help us discover the inner and outer resources we need to cope with our difficulties, to carry the burdens that life has placed upon our shoulders.

Prayer, honest communication with God, is the heart of Christian spirituality. Yet most of us do it so seldom. I wonder why. Are we not convinced of the power to prayer to change, to transform ourselves, others, and the world? Do we not believe in the healing power of prayer? Jesus’ life and ministry were infused with prayer, as was Paul’s. They experienced prayer as empowering.

Fifth, Paul reminds us to “Be grateful.” Paul was grateful for the Philippians. He calls them his “beloved,” “his joy and crown.” Every pastor would like to think this way of his/her

church. By the way, the word Paul uses for “crown” doesn’t mean one made of gold. It is a crown made of leaves and branches given to those who win a race. He is telling his church that they have done a good job and that they should be proud of what they have accomplished.

We need to remember our blessings. Some people keep a gratitude diary as an antidote to negative thinking and a pervasive pessimistic outlook on life. If we were to keep such a diary, I think we would be both surprised and humbled by the number of entries we would have. We might also be led to think about those who have less, which is most of the people of the world. Think of the victims of the coronavirus. Think of the people in Bangladesh who have been recently devastated by a cyclone. Think about little children with cancer, like the little six-year-old girl on our prayer list. Remember those who live in counties devastated by famine or torn apart by war. The little exercise of keeping a gratitude diary can enable us to put our petty problems in perspective.

Sixth, Paul tells us to carry on even in difficult times. He tells us to persevere. He tells his church to keep doing the things they have received and learned from him. He would tell us this as well. If we are to create a future, we cannot back off from the challenges that lie before us. We need to persevere, to carry on. As I mentioned a few weeks ago in my sermon on endurance, we need this more than ever as we work our way through the often depressing and mind-numbing experience of this pandemic.

At the end of this section of Paul’s letter, he returns to where he began. Paul reminds the Philippians and us that the Lord is near. He tells us to be conscious of God’s presence. The consciousness of God’s presence will give rise to prayer, to conversation with that God who is very near to us. This prayer will give rise to a deeper trust, to a stronger faith, to a sense of God’s comforting Word and presence. Then we will find the vision and strength we need to live as God would have us live.

Marana tha. The Lord is near. The realization of this alone can bring us inner peace, that peace that surpasses all understanding, that peace which the world can neither give nor take away. If we remember Paul’s guidelines, we will be able to “stand firm in the Lord” no matter what tragedy or hardship might befall us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough*

www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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