

Think On These Things
Philippians 4:2-9
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Cynthia Holder Rich

Do you remember the folk song “Home on the Range”? There is a phrase in that song that I was proud to learn when I was a child – because the words were not part of my child-like vocabulary. Can you guess the phrase?

It’s, “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word”.

I don’t know if the range is such a place, where seldom is heard a discouraging word. If you listen to Garrison Keillor’s radio show Prairie Home Companion, which features “The Lives of the Cowboys”, the cowboys on that range are full of discouraging words, which they share with anyone who will listen, and fling at each other with gay abandon.

But I have to admit, once I learned what the phrase meant, finding a place where seldom is heard a discouraging word, has been something of a goal of mine, which I muse on from time to time.

There are not so many of these places, it seems to me – these places where seldom is heard a discouraging word, where encouragement is the rule. These places are not great in number, and thus, highly prized.

Paul wants the church to be this kind of place – to be an encouragement zone, to be a place where people are encouraged – empowered – helped to approach life positively.

In the last chapter of his letter to the church at Philippi, a congregation he knew and loved, and people who knew and loved him, Paul encourages them to be encouraged – and encouraging. Over and over he brings positivity to the fore in his closing to them. It seems that this must be important, as he finds over 20 WAYS to say – be encouraged, stay positive, things are good – and he puts those 20 ways in just five verses.

Rejoice in the Lord always
Again I say rejoice
Let your gentleness be known to everyone
The Lord is near
Do not worry about anything
The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds
Whatever is true
honorable
pure
pleasing
commendable
If there is any excellence
Anything worthy of praise
Think on these things

Keep on doing the things you have learned from me
And the God of peace will be with you

That is a long list of encouraging words! Paul is encouraging them to keep going, knowing that they are facing hard stuff, not being “Pollyanna-sh” – after all, Paul is writing this letter to the people he loves from PRISON. And Paul is aware that members of the church are suffering as well – they they are experiencing oppression and opposition, for what they believe. It isn’t that Paul is being unrealistic, or simplistic. He isn’t saying – Don’t worry, be happy. He isn’t painting a smiley face for them or sending them a Facebook sticker – thumbs up! He for sure is not saying, “Whatever”.

While acknowledging that suffering is part of the journey, for them and for him, he calls them to be encouraged – to realize their blessedness – to understand that the good news continues, and to realize that God continues to empower and equip them for living out and living into this good news, and for carrying this good news into a world that has a desperate need to hear it and to join in its blessings and grace.

Thinking positively, being encouraged, encouraging others – these have a power that we seldom acknowledge. Life is hard, friends. Life is hard, and suffering and struggle are part of the journey – often, a daily part of the journey. And many, struggle is a part of life many times each day.

While all of this is true, and Paul acknowledges that it is true, Paul calls the people he loves to refocus, to reframe, to think on the good things.

Recent research shows that Paul may not have been just whistling Dixie. Being disciplined, disciplining ourselves, to see and speak the good stuff, turns out to change the ways our brains work – and thus, what we can do – at what level our capacity is. Specifically, what our capacity is for facing the future is directly impacted by whether we are thinking negative thoughts or positive thoughts.

A scholar who labors at a school somewhere north of here, a school which shall not be named, but whose colors are maize and blue...did a landmark study on what she calls “the broaden and build” theory of positive emotions. Barbara Fredrickson studied first what negative thinking does to the brain – which was not hard – for that research path has been well travelled – as depression, anxiety, fear and other negative emotions are the basis of many research initiatives.

Negative emotions program our brains to perform a specific action. If you are walking in the forest and you see a tiger, your brain registers a negative emotion – fear. Fear narrows our minds and focuses our thoughts. When you see the tiger, autonomic responses – involuntary physiological responses – occur. Blood is redirected to large muscle groups so we can run. Our heartbeat speeds up, our muscles tighten. Our brain moves all of our being to focus entirely on the immediate threat. When we are afraid, we are quite unable to focus on anything but that which has made us afraid. This is so we will do what we need to do to survive.

There are good reasons to respond this way when we are under threat. After all, the impulse to do what is necessary to continue life is strong for a reason. So the narrowing of our minds and the focusing of our thoughts on that which is threatening to take our life – this can be a good thing,

But what of positive thinking?

Dr. Frederickson found that positivity and contentment had been little studied, in comparison to fear, depression, anxiety. This might indicate our collective view of positive thinking – our sense that “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” is okay for children, our sense that *The Power of Positive Thinking* is not only out of date – it is only subscribed to by people who don’t get the way the world is.

The world is a dangerous place, getting more dangerous everyday. There are terrible people in the world, who are willing to do terrible things, and some of them are willing to videotape these terrible things and put them on the internet for all to see. There are terrible diseases in the world, and fear is growing that they cannot be contained. There are terrible wars, and too much bloodshed, and an oversupply of human capacity to be cruel and inhumane to other humans.

While we who live in the greater Findlay area might not see tigers everyday, here is plenty in the world to fear.

There was plenty in Paul’s world to fear, too. There was much that caused anxiety in Philippi. So why would anyone – in Paul’s day or ours – encourage people to be so unrealistic as to think positively? Why would anyone do this?

Because, as the research showed clearly, positive thinking does something to our brains, which makes of our lives and of our experience of life a different thing – a better thing – a more productive, proactive, increased capacity kind of thing.

Dr. Frederickson found that positive emotions like joy, contentment and love open us to seeing more possibilities in life. Moreover, positive emotions provide us with enhanced ability to build skills and develop resources for use both immediately and later in life. Positive emotions broaden our sense of possibilities and open our minds, which in turn allow us to build new skills and resources that can provide value in other areas of life. Thinking positively moves us to an increased preference of variety, and the research showed a “broad, flexible cognitive organization and ability to integrate diverse material” in people who had been given positive emotional stimuli. That’s a fancy way of saying positive thinking, focusing on the good, rejoicing always because the Lord is near, can result in your brain working differently. It can result in your brain organizing the information it receives differently. In fact, it can result in your brain realizing new ways to organize information. Your brain has increased capacity to think creatively, to solve problems, to develop new initiatives and programs, to collaborate and network with innovation – all because you were thinking positively.

It seems Paul might have been on to something, friends

If it is true that positive thinking increases our capacity to think creatively about the future, to see things that we wouldn't otherwise, to understand what is, and what may be, at a deeper and more complex level – what might that mean about ministry in the church now?

If it is true that in Philippi, the church was under great stress and persecution, with struggle as a daily reality for the church there, and that Paul speaks into that context of struggle, saying, “God has blessed us! God has really blessed us! Keep focused on the good stuff because that is Jesus’ call to us all!” – what does that mean about ministry here and now?

Most congregations in the US, including this one, have fewer people in the pews, fewer children in class, fewer dollars in the plate, than they used to, and it is EASY to get depressed – it is EASY to see the negatives – it is EASY to get stuck in a loop of sad thinking.

In fact, it is hailed – it is seen as realistic, and mature to be constantly aware of how bad things are, no matter what the actual situation is. Fear and anxiety can masquerade as responsibility, as grown-up thinking. But if we understand that even that thinking, even that very negative loop, makes it harder for us to find our way out of the problem; if we understand that focusing on how God has blessed us, remembering the joy we have in Jesus, looking around and realizing who IS here, instead of focusing on who is NOT here, opens our brains to creativity and innovation – and if we acknowledge that God has been so good to us, which is why we are here and why we have this place in which to worship and why we have the people who gather here around us –

We have to find ways to remain, or to become, positive. So how do we do that?

Prayer and meditation are key strategies. Prayer has been shown by Frederickson’s research to be an aid to increased mindfulness and purpose in life. Therefore, the discipline of thinking positively, remaining focused on God’s blessings to us, thinking on that which is true, honorable, just, pure, or worthy of praise, is easier when we pray and meditate regularly.

I don’t know the whys and wherefores of that according to the research. But for me – prayer is, at least in part, a release valve for the anxiety of life. In conversation with God, I come to remember something I too often forget – that God is greater than I am, that God actually already knows everything I bring to God in prayer, that God is already active.

It is such a relief to go to God in prayer, and for me, it is one way to very quickly regain calm.

I’m grateful that we have people who take part in a regular prayer ministry, on Sunday mornings and through the week. The study that starts this week, on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, will encourage those who take part to pray together, and to engage in prayer exercises to discern how God is leading us into tomorrow. There are opportunities to gather with others, that we might encourage each other in a focus on the good stuff God has done, is doing, and will do.

I have two invitations for you today. I invite you to join in the study and the prayer and let that help you reframe, refocus, and set your mind on the things that are pure, honorable, commendable, and worthy of praise and thanksgiving to God. And I invite us all to take a moment – before we leave this place – to recognize and affirm at least one thing that is worthy of

praise in our common ministry. Write it down, or speak it aloud, or do both. The result of all of us doing that will be at least a few moments of increased calm and contentment, that will lead to our brains working in the way God intends, with increased capacity for seeing a positive way forward.

Let's think together on the positive things that are all around us, that together, we might build this church into a place where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and where the frame for our ministry is joy.