

## **“Realities Revisited”**

Brian Henderson · October 9, 2011

Text: Philippians 4:1-9

Sometimes I wonder if we think the early churches we read about in the New Testament were somehow better and more put together than churches are today. After all, the churches we read about in the Bible are in the Bible. So...since they're in the Bible...there must be something about them that makes them special...that gives them special status even...

But in truth...I think it's fair to acknowledge that the churches to whom letters were sent and whose names are now in the New Testament, are really churches that had issues. At one level, these churches or congregations are in every way like churches or congregations today. The letters to these folk were letters of thanks and commendation at points...but for the most part...these were corrective letters...letters that sought to address issues and concerns that early church planters had for the Christian communities that were being established.

And in a time when we hear about churches or congregations closing and having to sell their properties...perhaps it might be an encouragement to note that not one of the congregations about which we read in the New Testament is in existence today.

Philippians, for the most part was a positive letter with many words of thanks and admiration by the Apostle Paul for the Christian folk meeting in the city of Philippi. Philippi was a city known as a place where many Roman military officers would retire. So...we can imagine that some members of this Christian community were retired...and probably retired military folk.

But for all of its positive attributes, our text today from chapter 4, reminds us that there were dynamics at work within this congregation that were challenging...dynamics that we can only imagine were keeping people at odds with each other...we can imagine that there were power issues at play...it's clear there were issues among its leaders (Paul is concerned about Euodia and Syntyche)...and who knows...chances are there were probably issues people had difficulty agreeing on...Philippi was a diverse city so it's well possible that this Christian community reflected this metropolitan diversity and so had to figure out how to cultivate ministry in this context. Sound familiar?

Be of the same mind...is the phrase used to encourage Euodia and Syntyche. We don't know what the problem or problems were between these two...but boy I wouldn't want my name preserved for all of history like theirs are! Can you imagine? Two thousand years from now folk reading about Kevin Padworski or Joe Greemore or Anne Jernberg or Warren

Risch or Mary Hulst because you couldn't get along...because you disagreed on the color of the carpeting or the number of worship services or the styles of music or your philosophy of ministry?

I don't think be of the same mind means agree on everything. Rather...be of the same mind suggests that Paul wanted folk to work together...to mutually respect each other in the living out of the gospel...in the living out of Jesus' model of living and loving.

Remember, earlier in this letter it's written...Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... And then we're given a description of Jesus' humility and ability to step out of his own comfort zone so as to reach-out to folk who were so vastly different from himself.

I wonder what Euodia and Syntyche had to give up? I wonder what level of pride and what claim on what they believed to be true they needed to yield to the other? I wonder how they were challenged to step out of their comfort zones?

I wonder how such questions may be questions for us today...even here at Calvary? I find myself asking myself these questions.

After going on to say some words about being gentle...which aren't these good words for folk like us today...let your gentleness be known to everyone...be gentle...remember always that there will be differences among you...so be gentle...be tender...be kind...be caring...be patient.

And after saying some words about prayer Paul writes, "...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

This is a phrase deserving of some reflection.

I can't help but think that the peace of God would have for a probably predominant, Roman, Christian congregation in a city like Philippi...the notion of God's peace...would have been understood in contrast to the Pax Romana—the Roman peace or the peace of the Romans...that period of history when the Roman Empire was at peace...when it had a relatively stable balance of powers throughout the Mediterranean world.

We know from history that the Pax Romana didn't last forever...in fact, it lasted for only about two centuries. Some governments as we know today never experience peace. Others experience peace and maybe some stability for centuries but never forever. This is a bit humbling to think about even now in this era as we witness, literally, the transfer and shifting of

powers world-wide. Even the United States is losing its grip on the international influence it had just a generation or two ago.

No matter what kind of worldly peace we know, Paul's words here in Philippians remind us of God's peace...a peace that spans eternity...a peace that can be experienced and embodied by folk like us even when there may be little peace in the world as we know it around us.

When we seek to live out the prophetic challenge of Micah...What does God require of us? But to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God... When we do what we can to model Jesus' life of love of others no matter who or how they are... I believe there is something of God's peace...of God's shalom that not only do we experience...but others experience through us.

But one more thought about these words... "...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

This is an interesting juxtaposition of words or worlds. Paul uses the language of peace with the language of war or of the military. The peace of God...will GUARD your hearts and minds...

Paul knew his audience. Paul knew how to communicate with folk. I can't help but wonder if this was Paul's gentle way of helping folk who were so wired to think in one way...to think anew in a different way.

These retired, Roman, military personnel may not have been too interested in God's peace because they knew about the Pax Romana...they had no need of God's shalom—God's way of being—God's way of offering well-being and safety to everyone and everything in creation. The Roman peace, as far as they were concerned, had this covered—for them.

As history has shown...the Pax Romana didn't last...it didn't guard or protect people forever. Somehow and in many ways and through many people however...the peace of God—God's shalom—continues to this day to be experienced and felt by people and places near and far from us.

I don't usually end a sermon by quoting a poem or song...but the words in my head and heart today are these...  
“Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.”

As we face realities of life just like congregations faced realities in the earliest of our Christian history, how will you allow peace—God's peace—to begin in you? Amen.