



“EVEN SO, WE PRAY”

SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 4: 1-9

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, October 15, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

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.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” (refrain)

Gentleness feels like a rare gift when we encounter it, when we feel it in our bodies. It may be rare, but, our bodies need it, like food and water—we need to know it—we need to extend it to ourselves so we can extend it to others.

Gentleness feeds a deep creaturely need that we humans have to be able to trust our surroundings, to feel accompanied, to feel safe.

Be gentle with yourself is an invitation I have offered to many if not all of you, especially at junctures when you are struggling, when life is heavy and hard, when you are overwhelmed, when you are grieving, when life is too much, too fast—that's trauma—too much, too fast.

Be gentle with yourself. That's not easy for us to do—to even know what it feels like to be gentle with ourselves. See if you can drop into some kind of gentleness right now. Some memory of you being gentle with yourself—a sweet nap on a rainy day, a quiet moment to pause and watch the breeze move through swaying branches, a healthy meal you prepared just for you, an affirmation you said to yourself on a hard day.

Horses teach us gentleness because they respond to it and need it. And they can sense when gentleness is not real—horses can read humans—they know when we are mad, sad, anxious. They know when we are trustworthy.

1-3 Images, 4 Video, 5-6 Images, 7 Video

(Go through horse images in order that they are numbered. Linger on the static images for about 10 seconds. Run videos without sound. Move through them all until you are through all the images. The default/thumbnaill is Image #1)

Talk about:

- Herd instinct
 - safety
 - health
 - well being
 - Food
 - safe reproduction
- Prey animals
 - instincts to flee
- You know horses feel safe when they are mutually grazing.
- Alpha behaviors are for safety
 - rehearsed around food and movement in the pasture.
- Mares and foals form a deep bond from grooming and body proximity
- Huge animals that have the power to do great harm, but they are prey—so they teach us gentleness, because they need it from us.
- They like to have grounded, clear people around them.

Re-member that there is gentleness here. Gentleness for you and in you.

There is support here and love here for you and from you.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

Where does gentleness get us in the world? What impact does it have in the face of withering violence? Gentleness can feel like a fool’s instruction, it can sound like a naive mentality.

What we see in the world—and we see it in stark relief in Gaza right now, is that violence ruptures the most elemental needs of creation, of human beings. What is happening and has been happening in the Gaza strip, in the larger Middle East, for generations is a rupture of the human family—and violence has been the repetitive tool to break the human family apart. And what is happening there grew out of trauma, genocide, war, colonization. It is an intense iconography of some of the deepest wounds of the human family.

At Faith 4 Justice on Thursday we spent time together with the pain, the sorrow, the shame, the anger, the confusion.

Lisa Forehand from Carolina Jews for Justice, shared humbly and earnestly with us. Her vulnerability was a gift to that moment in time—where people of faith were gathered who come from different social locations and perspectives and formations.

Lisa invited us to be careful about the language we use when we talk about what is happening right now in the Middle East. She also encouraged us to go beyond mainstream media outlets for our information.

She also named all the complexity of the history and the ways trauma and white supremacy and militarism scramble our shared capacity to understand and to not feed the violence with our mentalities and our place in the Western world.

Lisa also reminded us not to equate Judaism and Zionism, not to equate Judaism or all Israeli citizens with the Israeli government. She reminded us not to equate Islam with Hamas, not to equate the Palestinian people with Hamas. She reminded us that it would be like assuming all Americans backed the rhetoric of Donald Trump. That we as American citizens should be lumped with the actions of our government, of our military.

She reminded us that many people who are Jewish are just one generation from the Holocaust. And that inflammatory language can fan the flames of anti-semitism and Islamophobia—that make the world a dangerous place for Jewish people and Muslim people

without attention to where they are in terms of their perspective on the violence that is happening there at the hands of the Israeli government and Hamas.

President Biden also does not speak for me or all Americans or all Jewish people. His language this week was violent and harmful. When he fed the rhetoric around other human beings being “pure evil,” he used his power abusively. When we hear the people of Gaza called “human animals” and when we hear that the whole region should be “eradicated” we cannot fall into that trap of seeing other human beings as less than human.

The United Nations has an informative historical timeline that goes all the way back to 1885 when the terms Zionism was coined. There you can learn more about how the British Empire and the United States have been involved in fanning the flames of the violence in the Middle East.

You can find links to these resources in my sermon manuscript which will be posted online next week.

Many Americans know so little of the history. We have been fed a very limited and at times extremely skewed views of the human toll.¹

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

2.3 million is the Gaza population. About ½ of the population of Gaza are children—under the age of 18. ² Save the Children in 2022 said that 4 out of 5 of the children in Gaza suffer from depression, grief, fear. 50% of them suffer from suicidal thoughts. Trauma has defined their lives and the lives of their families. This is the generation who has grown up in the shadow of the blockade—which was placed by the government of Israel 16 years ago.³

(Lives Lost Graphic)

This graphic does not include the current violence.

¹ https://www.un.org/unispal/historical-timeline/?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=277818166&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-9SPIWQgZnkERcxx11EU9UnOHMsdDWdhktoIciUWOB7wy0Y3DAdpXHHTXj3evJcnS4Yr8wj0SEnx-4iP5FysAcCGhgHGQ&utm_content=277818166&utm_source=hs_email

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/13/gazas-terrified-children-all-too-aware-israels-bombs-stole-their-joy>

³ <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/after-15-years-blockade-four-out-five-children-gaza-say-they-are-living-depression-grief-and>

Al Jazeera reports: “At least 2,215 Palestinians have been killed and 8,714 wounded in Israeli air attacks on Gaza. The number of people killed in Israel has reached 1,300, with more than 3,400 wounded.”⁴

The category of war crimes are meant to protect innocent civilians from cruelty, from getting caught in the military devastations of war. Right now, on the planet, there are many examples of those boundaries around human life being brazenly ignored. Children are dying in Israel. Children are dying in Gaza.

(take down graphic of human casualties)

Children are dying in Ukraine. Children are dying in the United States—caught in the crossfire of our government’s refusal to take impactful action to stop things like systemic poverty, racism, homelessness, and gun violence.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

The shared analysis we have been working on together for the last 7 years around how white supremacy culture shapes and distorts us is something that can support us as we feel the pain of the rupture in the human family that we see in Gaza and Israel, in the Middle East.

It can be hard for people in white bodies to see ourselves as caught up in systems and structures of violence. It can be even harder for us to see ourselves as part of the problem. People in white bodies can believe we are experts on a topic because we read a few articles. We can struggle to center the voices of the most impacted. These are all patterns of white supremacy culture that we are learning to spot together.

(White Supremacy Slide)

White supremacy tells us there are good guys and bad guys; white supremacy teaches us to demonize and terrorize.

White supremacy teaches us to be fragile when we are called in about the impact of our actions and mentalities.

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/10/13/israel-hamas-live-dozens-killed-while-fleeing-to-southern-gaza#:~:text=At%20least%20%2C215%20Palestinians%20have,with%20more%20than%203%2C400%20wounded.>

White supremacy teaches us to see an either/or world, when the world is just not that at all. Violence makes everyone less safe, and it feeds the delusions of binaries, the delusions of us against them.

War and terror are an affront to our humanity. Violence and oppression are an affront to our humanity. What does it take to stay with that layer of our shared existence? How do we resist the temptation to dehumanize, the otherize. It is in all of us—it is a fear response, a protective response, a trauma response.

When we look at the history of apartheid in our country, in South Africa, and in Palestine—we can see the fingerprint of white supremacy, we can see the legacy of trauma, we can see the woundedness of our human family. These are the same impulses that fed the Inquisition, the Doctrine of Discovery, Manifest destiny, the Salem witch trials, the withering white lash against Reconstruction, Stonewall, voter suppression, taking away reproductive rights, taking away access to health care for trans youth, environmental racism, the climate crisis.

Remember the ways we are learning to see the intersections of race, economic status, gender identity, sexuality, and body ability. In all of these examples, being Black, being Brown means you bear the heaviest weight of the violence of these systems.

And that is true in Gaza as well. It doesn't minimize the pain of others, but it should give us a clarity of mind and purpose as we continue our work together. A world with less white supremacy culture, is a world with less violence. And a world with less violence is a world with more freedom for all people. Our work is not just for us, it is for all. We are unlearning, we are relearning. We are practicing gentleness—in a way that is uncharted and in a way that is needed. Gentleness isn't naive. It isn't in denial. It isn't disembodied or disengaged from reality. It taps into our deepest reality as sentient creatures. We need each other. We can't be safe without trustworthy places to call home. And that has to be true for all, not just for some, for us to truly be safe.

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

The Jesus followers in Philippi were finding new ways to be together. They were pushing up against the boundaries and barriers of patriarchy and Empire. It's no coincidence that this part of the letter mentions two women's names, Euodia and Syntyche. In fact, the Jesus following community there may have been largely women. Acts 16 Luke says Paul went to Philippi where women had gathered to pray. And Paul is asking the community to support these two women as they deal with some challenges.

We don't know what the challenges are—but that community did. We don't know who Clement is, but that community did.

This part of Paul's letter is beautiful, elevating and grounding all at once.

***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.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

What does it look like for us to be a part of healing the human family today, in this moment on the planet earth, in a human body, as we don't avert our eyes from the suffering of our siblings in the human family?

This is the question that we hold at the center of who we are, Grace Covenant. And our ancestors in the faith were called not to focus their energy on worry, but prayer—that doesn't mean we don't worry, but that we let our worry feed our prayer life—we don't let the paralyze or numb us or overwhelm us, but we use it to heal the human family.

When we pray, we change the world. (talk about prayer)

Prayer is not all we are called to do, but it is a way for us to honor our shared humanity, to put a different energy into the world than violence and supremacy. It is a way to practice gentleness, a way to nourish our deep connections.

As people of faith, prayer is one of the things no one can take away from us. It is always something we can do—with tears, with groans, with sighs too deep for words, with song, with movement, with stillness and silence, with voices joined together, with one lone voice speaking into what can feel like a void.

It's not a small thing to say that "Even so, we pray." It's one way we resist losing our humanity. It's one we insist that there can be a better day and a better way. It's one way we can take good care of the human herd—and begin to imagine each other at peace, with a place to finally feel safe at home together.

Thanks be to God.