“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”

Philippians 4:4-7

December 11, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. Advent is the name given to the four weeks leading up to Christmas, and during Advent this year we are focusing on several short phrases or thoughts from scripture. Each one of these short phrases is like a little prayer for our soul and spirit. Put another way each one points to one of the ways God calls to live in this world as disciples of Jesus Christ, so His life and love can flow through us. The first week our prayer was “Increase our love.” The second week it was “Pure and blameless.” As I look back on my words and actions over the past couple of weeks I can tell you there have been a number of times when I did something, or said something, that was a direct result of one of these two thoughts, “Increase my love,” and “Make me pure and blameless.” I can also think of several times when I didn’t say something or I didn’t do something because of one of these. And, sadly I can also recall several moments when I didn’t heed either one and I said or did something I regret.

Today we are going to add a third thought to these first two. This week the phrase comes from Philippians 4:5. “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” The key word here is *gentleness*. Let’s think about this for a moment.

Gentleness – When I began to think about what this word meant for me I discovered that for the most part I had a very positive response to it. I think of gentleness as a helpful and desirable quality or virtue. I see a gentle person as someone who is sensitive to what’s going on around him or her. This allows him or her to kind of forget about themselves and focus on the needs of others. It suggests a person who isn’t inclined to make waves or ruffle feathers, someone who knows when to let things go, or look the other way. I think of them as someone who doesn’t sweat the small stuff, but also as someone who knows how to respond sensitively to the big stuff. Gentleness is often what is needed to defuse a difficult or volatile situation. It’s how I hope to respond to someone who does something wrong or offensive, and how I hope they might respond to me when I do the same.

So most of my thoughts about gentleness were positive. But I did eventually come up with something else. It occurred to me that perhaps you could be too gentle. Sometimes in an attempt to be gentle you could look the other way when you shouldn’t, or speak the truth so softly it is never heard.

I want you to know that the gentleness Paul envisions here embraces all the positive things I just said about gentleness and avoids the problems I just mentioned. I want to see if I can show this to you. The key is in paying attention to what Paul says just before this verse and what he says just after it.

Look at what Paul writes just before this. He says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” All I want you to note is that Paul wrote these words, and indeed the whole letter, from prison. Paul is in prison and yet he writes, “Rejoice!” not once, but twice. Who says “Rejoice!” from prison? Where does the strength come from to do that?

Then look at what comes just after. “The Lord is near.” Jesus is not far off. He is not unconcerned. He is powerful and He is here. Again, this is from a man in prison.

Finally, Paul adds some of the best words of encouragement ever. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So what is the gentleness Paul has in mind here? It is the powerful gentleness of Christ in us. It is a gentleness that comes from our trust in Him and in His promises. It’s not just sympathy. It’s not just tenderness. It’s not just self-restraint. It’s Christ in us.

We are gentle with others and with ourselves because we know the Lord is near. We are gentle with others and ourselves because He has tamed our anxious hearts and filled us with His peace. We can offer a gentle word or a gentle touch, because we know God keeps His promises and His Word is true. In other words it is not in our own strength that we are gentle, but His.

Recently I had a powerful experience of this during a stressful time in my own life. Many of you know our daughter Jordan is working for Living Water. This fall she led two mission teams to Rwanda to drill a well and provide clean water to those in need. This happened as she was heading to Rwanda for the first trip. She was to fly from Houston to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam she was to connect with the rest of the team and fly on to Kigali. Unfortunately her plane had to make an unscheduled stop in Halifax for a medical emergency. As a result of that delay she landed in Amsterdam just as the plane for Kigali was taking off with the rest of the team. We got her first text about 5:30 a.m. our time. They had re-routed her through Istanbul, and there was concern in her words. She was traveling with another woman from Houston. Her name was Deborah and that’s all we knew. When she and Deborah went to the gate to board the plane to Istanbul, Jordan’s boarding pass worked, but Deborah’s didn’t and she had to go someplace and get it fixed.

In the next few minutes we started getting more and more anxious texts. Jordan: “They are boarding. Deborah isn’t here. I don’t know where she is. Should I get on the plane? What should I do? I have no idea where she is.” We were trying to help. “Stay together. No. Get on the plane. No. Stay together.” More from Jordan: “I don’t know how I’d even find her. She should be here. I think I have to get on this flight. She could be anywhere in the airport.”

And then: Silence. No more texts. Our daughter was halfway across the world, alone, worried about Deborah, and on a plane to Istanbul. I’d love to tell you that I was calm, cool and collected, that I was a model of true faith and trust in the Lord, that I wasn’t anxious or worried, but that would be a lie. Truth was, Sande and I were a mess. We started contacting all the Living Water people we knew to let them know. But it was 4:30 a.m. in Texas. So we just had to wait. And wait.

A couple hours later, one of Jordan’s co-workers, Kate, texted us. She had just heard about the situation. So this is what she wrote. “I’m so sorry I didn’t see this earlier. But glad Hope and David are on top of it.” Hope and David are two people who work at Living Water and we knew they knew what was going on, so that was some comfort. But it was what she said next that turned the tide in my heart. She added, “I trust Daddy’s got this.” Daddy with a capital “D.” “I trust Daddy’s got this.” That’s all. And that was enough.

 “I trust Daddy’ got this.” Do you know what this is? I think it is a perfect example of exactly what Paul has in mind when he says, “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” The gentleness Paul wants us to share is not the ordinary gentleness of the world. It’s not ‘I feel your pain.’ Or ‘I know what you are going through.’ Or even ‘I understand.’ It’s ‘I know who’s running the universe. The Lord is near. And you can take all your anxiety, and all your fear, and share it with Him.’ The gentleness Paul asks us to share is the powerful, strong, appropriate, gentleness that comes from our faith and trust in the Lord and His Holy Spirit living in us.

We can be gentle with others and with ourselves because the Lord is near. We can be gentle with others because the Lord is working in our hearts so that we are not anxious. We can be gentle with others and ourselves because He has filled us with His peace. We can be gentle with others and ourselves because God keeps His promises and His Word is true.

“I trust Daddy’s got this.” Simple. Gentle. And, most of all, true.

“I trust Daddy’s got this.” I invite you to ask the Lord to help you to embrace this for yourself, and then to ask Him to show you where and how He wants you to share it with someone else.

*Increase our love. Make me pure and blameless*. *Let your gentleness be evident to all*. I trust Daddy’s got this. Amen.