ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

October 11, 2026 – PENTECOST 20 /PROPER 23, YR. A — The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: "*Take it to the Lord in Prayer*"

Isaiah 25:1-9	(Praise and exalt the Lord, for He has done great things)
Psalm 23	(The Lord cares for His people like a good shepherd)
Philippians 4:1-9	(Rejoice in the Lord; think on what is excellent)
St. Matthew 22:1-14	(Jesus tells the parable of a guest at a wedding banquet)

In Today's reading from Philippians, St. Paul gives us a spiritual prescription for living the Christian life, particularly when things get difficult, which tends to be often: rejoice, be gentle, do not be consumed by anxiety, pray, give thanks, think about what is good, and then practice what you have learned. It sounds simple. But, as we know, that's not always easy.

The apostle begins by saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Always? That word can make us uncomfortable. Surely Paul doesn't mean that Christians are supposed to walk around pretending everything is wonderful. Even Paul did not have an easy life. He wrote these words while imprisoned. He knew disappointment, conflict, persecution, uncertainty, and loss. So Christian joy cannot mean pretending that hardship isn't real. Rather, it means that hardship does not get the final word, because Paul is not telling us to rejoice in our *circumstances*, but "in the Lord."

It's like the words to the old hymn, "turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." As believers in Christ, we can grieve yet still have hope. We can be frightened but still have faith. We can be disappointed and still give thanks. We can be uncertain about tomorrow while still trusting that God is with us today. That is *joy*, which endures—not *happiness*, which is fleeting.

There is story about a woman who was going through an extraordinarily difficult period in her life. Someone asked her, "How are you doing?" She paused and said, "Well, I'm taking it one day at a time—and some days I'm taking it one hour at a time." That's probably a more honest expression of Christian faith than some of our more polished answers. There are times when faith is not the assurance that everything will work out. Sometimes faith means simply trusting that God is with us while we *wait* to see how things turn out.

This brings us to St. Paul's next instruction: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Paul is not suggesting that our anxiety can simply be switched off by an act of will. Instead, he gives us something to do with our fears and worries: take them to the Lord. "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Notice that Paul doesn't say, "Bring God only your important prayers." He says *everything*. The large things. The small things. The things we are embarrassed to admit we're worried about. The things we have prayed about a hundred times. The things we don't even know how to pray about. Lost a needle? Can't find a parking place? A friend might be dying? Your checking account is too low? Bring it <u>all</u> to God. He can handle it. We are often told God answers *every* prayer—with either Yes, No, or Wait. But we need to ask God for discernment to perceive the difference, and not simply think God doesn't care or isn't answering. Prayer doesn't always change our circumstances, but prayer can change the person *standing in those* circumstances.

Last Sunday, we heard about St. Francis of Assisi, who believed that *all things* belong to God. So when we hear "place it all in God's hands," it is not because we no longer care about [whatever it is]. Rather, we do this because we recognize that we were never meant to carry everything by ourselves. We're just giving over to, surrendering to, God what belongs to Him anyway. And Paul tells us that when we do that, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I love Paul's choice of the word "guard." In Greek it is "*phoureó*," which means to guard, protect, or keep in custody. With this term, there is such a firm sense of harboring and defending our soul.

Paul does not say that the peace of God which fills our hearts can make all our problems disappear. Nor does he guarantee we will suddenly understand why everything is happening. He says God's peace will guard—protect, harbor, and defend—our hearts and minds. It's almost as though Paul imagines God's peace standing at the door of our hearts like a sentry, saying: Fear may come in—but it doesn't get to take over. Grief may come in—but it doesn't get to destroy hope. Uncertainty may come in—but it doesn't get to drive out faith. That is the unsurpassable peace of Christ.

And then Paul gives us perhaps the most practical advice of all: "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." Paul understands something that modern psychology has also taught us: whatever we continually focus on is what shapes our thoughts, actions, and ultimately our character. If we spend our days feeding on outrage, fear, resentment, and bad news, we should not be surprised when we begin to feel frightened, angry, and upset. So, Paul says, deliberately make room for something better: Look for what is true. Look for what is beautiful. Look for what is honorable. Look for what is worthy of gratitude. And think about, focus on, and praise God for these things.

This does not mean ignoring our own—or the world's—problems. Christians are not called to put our heads in the sand. It means that we refuse to allow darkness to become the only thing we can see. Perhaps that is especially important in the world in which we now live. We are surrounded by voices telling us what is wrong. Paul reminds us to become people who also recognize what is right and virtuous—people who can notice kindness, recognize courage, celebrate generosity, see beauty, say thank you, and rejoice.

That is one reason the Christian community matters so much. Paul is not writing these words to an individual sitting alone in a room. He is writing to a community of faith. He names people who are having difficulties with one another and encourages them to find reconciliation. He tells them to stand firm together. In other words, we help each other carry the burdens that are too heavy to carry alone. We offer to pray for, and try to encourage one another. And sometimes a fellow Christian's faith carries us when our own faith is exhausted. There are times when another person's calm reminds us we don't have to be afraid. Or, occasions when we have run out of words and a friend says, "Let's pray about this." And sometimes—perhaps more often than we realize—the simple caring *presence* of another believer is God's answer (or partial answer) to our need.

Finally, St. Paul counsels, "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." Notice, he doesn't merely say, "Think good thoughts" or exercise positive thinking. He says "practice what you have learned and received." Christian faith is not simply something we believe. It is something we practice. We practice forgiveness. We practice gratitude and generosity. We practice gentleness and patience. We practice love and compassion. And, we practice prayer and looking for God's goodness—which is everywhere, if we will open our spiritual eyes. And the more we practice these things, the more they become integral to who we are.

It's been said that when you can't control what is happening *around* you, you can still choose what to cultivate *within* you. That is very close to St. Paul's message. We cannot control every circumstance. We cannot prevent every sorrow. We cannot make every person behave as we wish they would. However, we *can* bring our troubles, worries, fears, and anxieties to God. And when we do, the Holy Spirit will help us choose gratitude and joy, and turn our attention toward what is true and beautiful and good. And we can trust that, in Christ, we are never carrying the burdens of life alone.

So, perhaps the invitation of today's Epistle lesson is not to become people who never worry. It is to become people who know *where to take* our worries. Not people who never experience sorrow, but people who know where to find hope. Not people who understand everything, but people who know Whom we can trust when we don't understand. And not people who are joyful because life is always easy, but people who can rejoice because *God* is always faithful—and always present.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." And then, in the midst of everything we cannot control, may we rediscover the promise with which Paul leaves us: "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." *Amen.*