

## Standing Firm in the Lord

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.*

Paul calls the community in Philippi to “stand firm in the Lord in this way.” He has been talking about being on the journey toward the fullness of life in Christ, as a community and as individuals. He spoke of “pressing on to make the power of resurrection his own,” to know more fully the new life we have in Christ, which is our true nature, who God made us to be. This journey has struggles and obstacles, most of which are within us. This journey calls for our full attention. For me, that is the best definition of the spiritual life—paying attention to our lives as those made and called by God to live the life of a true human being, waking up to who we really are. The journey is never ended, never over. We never “arrive,” for in a sense, we are already there. God’s gift of love accepts us as we are. We don’t have to DO anything but continually receive that gift of God’s love and live out of it, let it unfold in all the dimensions of our lives.

Stand firm in the Lord in this way. Paul does not mean digging in our heels or becoming rigid. He doesn’t mean arrogance or self-righteousness. That would contradict the call to be on a journey of spiritual growth and maturing. I think what he means is to remain committed to this journey of our own healing and transformation, and to our life together as a community of God’s love in Christ. When it seems too hard or to make no sense at all, stand firm in the Lord, says Paul. I think he means stay rooted in God through Christ. Though everything around you seems to be falling apart or threatening or whatever, though you may not even understand where you are headed or what is going on in your own inner life, stand firm in the Lord. Remain grounded in God and in the life of following Christ. Be at peace right in the midst of it all.

This is the paradox of being a community and persons of faith. We are called to be on a journey together and individually, to live our lives as a never-finished process of following Jesus Christ and learning what he has to teach us, of growing in our understanding of and our capacity to love. It is tempting at times to want to give up that journey, to go find a community we think might be better, more perfect, might meet our needs more fully. We get disillusioned. Our needs don’t get met or our expectations are disappointed. It happens every time we encounter the reality of being in community, that it is the hardest thing in the world, that it is messy, not neat, that it requires something of us. Being Christ’s community asks us to go deeper in ourselves, in our relationship with God. Really being in community asks us to be willing to drop our ideas, our defenses, our judgments, and our demands that our needs be met. It asks us to open our hearts and minds, to be willing to “stay put,” as it were, to learn to be at peace with ourselves and others, even while we are on that journey of faith.

I sometimes say, in a way that is only half-joking, that I have no idea what this community is about or how it works. I am often startled at how clueless I feel as to how to be spiritual leader of such a group. Yet I know how important it is, when I face my own disillusionment and want to give it all up, to “stand firm in the Lord,” to reaffirm my understanding that there is no other way than to be this weak, puzzling, mysterious, and messy thing we call a community of Jesus, a community of God’s love. I come back to the solidity of knowing God’s peace in Christ given to me and to us. “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.” Then I can give my attention once again to being on that journey, learning, growing, being receptive.

*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.*

The central theme of Paul’s letter is the “mind of Christ.” He reminds the community that it is to have that mind, a servant mind that brings us a unity beyond ideas or opinions, practices or beliefs. It is a unity with God that we receive in Christ. And when there are breaks, conflicts, tensions, as there will always be, we go back to this mind. We help each other go back to this mind.

We don't know anything about these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, or why they were in conflict. It does not really matter. Paul tells the community that it is to help these women touch their one-mindedness in Christ. He doesn't give any instructions as to how to do that. It is simply the responsibility of the community to help them, to draw near to them. I think that Paul believes that where there is a will there is a way. Where we desire to be of help to someone who is hurting, if we are open to learning the best way to help, we will find it.

When there is tension in the community, we often respond by avoiding the situation. We feel powerless or afraid, or we just want people to behave so we can have peace of mind! Sometimes our response is to talk about the situation with others, analyzing it and the parties involved. Sometimes we jump to take sides, our minds latching on to what is right and wrong; we only add to the alienation, the adversarial spirit. That is not the kind of helping Paul counsels. Our helping must arise from the mind of Christ. The servant mind, not the dominating mind. Not the mind that goes in with all the answers to "fix" the situation, but the mind that is humble and open, that simply offers presence and caring. It is the mind that seeks to relieve suffering. Paul leaves it to us to find the best way to help. And I think that is the wisest path. We can do it if we are working with our own inward journeys as part of a community of Jesus Christ, if we are cultivating in ourselves the mind of Christ.

One other thing about these verses...these women are Paul's co-workers, along with the men! We don't know why Paul, or someone using Paul's name, wrote about women keeping quiet or being submissive, but Paul, here and in other places, clearly states that women were his partners in the work of the gospel. They worked side-by-side with Paul. Enough said.

*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.*

For Paul, joy is the foundation, the undercurrent of the life of faith. It is not superficial happiness that depends on things going our way. It is not a conditional joy—I'll be happy when I achieve this or that; I'll be happy when so-and-so stops being so (fill in the blank); I'll be happy when I am no longer depressed or struggling financially or when I find more friends, a nicer house, or whatever. It is the joy that is not dependent on any of these things. It is the joy that comes from simply BEING one who knows the infinite, ever-present, and unconditional love of God, the very Source and Power of the universe.

How can this be? Because our truest, deepest Self is connected to God. It is the smaller self, the ego, we might say, that gets hung up over not having this or that, not being loved, not getting attention, or not achieving things so that we feel important. Next time you feel unloved or unappreciated, or you are unhappy because of something you don't have, try this: Become aware that there is a You that is greater than the "me" that is unhappy because of this or that. It is the You that IS aware of your unhappiness. But the funny thing is, this You, this larger Self, is not identical with that smaller self. It is the true Self that is able of being aware of its life in God, of the larger and deeper picture of life. It is the Self that realizes, maybe little by little, that its joy and happiness is not attached to any of the things we've been programmed to think of as important and fulfilling. It is the life Jesus was trying to awaken us to when he said such things as "Contemplate the birds of the air and the flowers of the field; they don't work or weave; they are not fretting over clothing or food; they simply are who God made them to be. They trust God." Our feelings come and go, rise and fall with the conditions of our lives. We get attached to things and persons; we lose them, and we suffer. Yet our awareness of God and our life in God is much deeper than that. It allows us to be grounded and at peace, joyful at all times.

*Let your gentleness be known to everyone.* The word here has a fullness of meaning. Gentleness, yes. But also "what is right and fitting," what is most helpful, what is the right thing. It is gentleness and wisdom and understanding. Here again we detect something of the "solidity," the standing-firmness that Paul started with. Gentleness, in this case, means non-violence toward others, certainly. But it also means an awareness of how things work together, a regard not only for each part, but for the whole, not only for each person, but for the whole community. This kind of gentleness receives each person as God in Christ has received us. Yet it also has

within it an awareness of how things need to work together in the community, how each person needs to find the best way of being part of the whole.

*Do not worry about anything. Let your requests be made known to God in prayer.* Or as the old hymn says, "Take it to the Lord in prayer." "Worry" here means anxious striving after something or over-caring about something or someone. Paul has talked about striving after fullness of life in Christ. But it is never anxious striving. The spiritual life is not to be filled with uneasiness or distress or a constant sense of being unfulfilled. It must be "effortless effort," if it is to be effort at all. It is an effort that takes place within God's grace, God's unconditional love for us.

There is so much to worry about, so many people to be concerned for. But Paul knows that it does nothing or no one any good to worry about it or them. Worry accomplishes nothing. Anxious striving reveals only our lack of closeness to God and makes things worse. That is how Paul concludes. If we are continuing to be on this journey of faith, growing and deepening in our true life, the life we receive in Christ, if we are rooting and grounding our lives and our life together in God through Christ—standing firm in the Lord, as he puts it—if we are seeking the joy, the gentleness, the releasing of anxiousness and worry, then we will discover, little by little, that *the peace of God, which is beyond our understanding, will guard, or keep, our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*. It is the deepest paradox of the life of faith—what we are doing, what we are striving for, what we are seeking, God, along the way and in the end, gives and establishes in us. Peace beyond our understanding.