



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **The Peace That Passes Understanding**

Philippians 4:1-9

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The peace that surpasses understanding. What is that about? My understanding is that my human rights as a woman and as a gay person are being debated in a Supreme Court confirmation hearing this week. My understanding is that this election will have a huge impact on my life, but an even greater impact of the lives of those whose skin color, documentation, and income level is different than mine.

My understanding is that there are people out fighting to maintain white supremacy and racism as the way of the world. My understanding is that this pandemic is far from under control and that we will be living with the effects of it for a long time. My understanding is that there are likely to be long-term effects from the virus for some people who contract it.

My understanding is that life as we know it has been changed forever. My understanding does not give me any peace. But this Scripture claims that there is a peace that surpasses my understanding. There is something beyond what I can understand. There is something so true, so real, and so unchanging, that it offers a peace that is accessible even in the midst of all of those things I understand to be true for right now.

How do we access the peace that surpasses understanding?

Some meditation teachers will tell you that our thoughts, feelings, and worries are like clouds. They come and go. But there is something *beyond* those thoughts and feelings and worries that are like clouds: There is the reality of the sky. The sky beyond the clouds is always there, always accessible. We need only let the clouds pass and we will see the sky again. Meditation is one way to anchor ourselves in the reality that is beyond the current reality: the one that is eternal.

In our tradition, we call that reality the kin-dom of heaven. It is that ever-present, but often obscured reality in which God reigns and love is the only law of the land. It is always at hand, but we fail to see it when our own anxieties and fears fill our lives to the brim. We fill ourselves until there is simply no room for God's kin-dom. We become so certain that change is impossible. That hate will keep winning. That justice will never be served. That the kin-dom is simply never going to be within reach. As long as we fill our minds and hearts with those thoughts, we will never know the peace that surpasses understanding.

Paul writes the letter to the church in Philippi from prison. He has declared that Jesus is Lord, when the Roman occupiers insisted that Caesar is Lord. For that, he was arrested. The church in Philippi would have understood the danger in this. Philippi was a military town. Allegiance to Rome was expected. Allegiance to Jesus could get you in big trouble. It was a lot to worry about.

The church in Philippi had both internal and external problems. People in the church were arguing about who was in and who was out. People outside the church were persecuting the church for its allegiance to God over and above allegiance to Rome. To top it all off, the founder of their church, Paul, was in prison. Talk about an anxious church system. They had to be full to the brim with concerns, worries, fears, and uncertainties. They must have been so full up on their understanding of the world they were living in that they had absolutely no room for the eternal truths of the kin-dom.

So Paul writes them this letter with one theme that seems to come back again and again. You could call the theme "kenosis." Kenosis is a word for emptying oneself. Paul talks in Chapter Two of the letter about Christ having equality with God, but instead of taking advantage of that, he emptied himself and took on the form of human, a lowly servant. Then he talks about two people the Philippians knew well, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Both of these people had given up so much in order to be of service to the church in Philippi, and Paul holds them up as examples of faithful servants.

Then, Paul talks about his own circumstances. He knows he may be executed for his crimes, but hopes that he will not. Not for his own gain, but so that he may further empty himself, in service of the eternal truths of the kin-dom. He longs to be able to be of service again. He counts everything he gains as a loss, an

emptying, for the sake of Christ, so that he might be filled only with those things that are of the kin-dom of heaven.

And so, as the church in Philippi, filled with an understanding of their own struggles reads this letter, Paul encourages them to empty themselves of the struggles they are having between them. To let go of their hopelessness and their despair and their anxiety, and to instead fill themselves up with those things that are of the eternal kin-dom of heaven. To get beyond the storm clouds that come and go to find the eternal sky that lives beyond. To look for glimpses of that sky: glimpses of the kin-dom all around them. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, any excellence, anything worthy of praise. Fill up your minds and hearts with those things. Those things are eternal. Those things help us to keep on keeping on when the fight starts to feel too difficult and overwhelming.

When Paul invites us not to worry, but instead to pray, this is what he means. He means for us to empty ourselves. When we take a walk to clear our minds, we are praying. When we write down our worries and crumple up the paper and throw it in the recycling bin, we are praying. When we meditate to clear our minds, we are praying. Whenever we practice this kind of kenosis, emptying ourselves of our self-defeating narratives about our lives and our world, we are praying. And whenever we allow ourselves to be filled with the eternal things of the kin-dom of heaven, things that are true, honorable, and just — when we allow ourselves the room to imagine a world in which truth is honored and justice is done for the most vulnerable, where beauty is celebrated and praised — whenever we think on these things, we are praying.

So this week, let's take Paul's words to the Philippians as our own charge. Do not worry about anything, but in everything through prayer and supplication, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.