

OSF General Assembly 2024 Day Two

Phil. 4:6-9

John 14: 23-29

Well you have begun Day Two of the General Assembly. I trust that Day One went well, that you followed the “ground rules,” that none of you “grieved the Holy Spirit,” that there was no “bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, reviling” among you, and that all of you were “kind, compassionate and forgiving to one another.”

The overriding theme in the scriptures chosen for today’s liturgy seems to be PEACE—the peace that surpasses all understanding, the peace that only can come from the Holy Spirit, not the world.

Paul is right back at us today with more advice, this time in his letter to the Philippians (or as one hapless college seminarian once proclaimed: “A reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Fallopians.”) I think Paul was a master psychologist. In this short passage today, there are three key principles of Pauline psychology: Prayer, Peace, and Pondering.

He starts off by saying, “Have no anxiety at all...” I suspect that one of the main reasons that people seek out psychologists is that they are suffering from anxiety or depression. St. Paul’s three principles are his answer to anxiety, beginning with prayer.

“Have no anxiety” does not mean “don’t worry, be happy.” It doesn’t mean not to prepare and plan for the problems of the future. It does mean to entrust them all to God, not just subconsciously but consciously and verbally in prayer. God pays attention. We don’t have to worry like the 450 prophets of Baal whom we saw a couple weeks ago, wondering if he was napping or on vacation when he didn’t light their fire. Our God listens and responds and lights our fire.

And that will bring us to peace, “the peace of God that surpasses all our understanding which will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” I have repeated those exact words hundreds of times in my years as a priest. They are contained in the final blessing to mourners at the prayers of committal at the gravesite of a loved one. It strikes me as a simple, near perfect prayer for people trying to deal with a loss that is breaking their hearts.

The peace that we get from prayer comes not from us, but from God. It is the real presence of God right in my very soul. This peace, as Jesus says to the apostles today at the Last Supper is a peace which the world cannot give. It is peace with God, and therefore with my self, and therefore with my neighbor. Thomas Merton put it all in one sentence, when he wrote, “We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves; and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.”

And how do we get there? Paul says, use your head. **Think** on these things... What things? “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” And don’t just think about them fleetingly, but ponder them faithfully. A spiritual director once told me, you can direct your thoughts, just as you can steer your car. So direct your thoughts away from what is dark and false and evil and ugly to what is light and true and good and beautiful. For as we think, so we become.

So wherever the Spirit leads you all in today’s Assembly, I suggest that you use Paul’s three principles: Prayer, Peace and Pondering. And the Holy Spirit will get you where you need to be.