

7th After Epiphany, February 23, 2014

Children's & adult choir combined, mish moment re Zoe, commission Guatemala, bibles out
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Whatever

I wonder when they started naming generations. The Greatest Generation. That sold Tom Brokaw some books. The Baby Boomers. They've been busy. The Roaring 20's. I wonder if they sounded Roaring at the time. The dark ages. Did the sun ever come out, or were things just in black and white? I myself belong to Gen X. A subsequent group was called Gen Y. Apparently they've struggled to name more recent generations.

I have a proposal for this current crop of young people. I can't claim it's original, I may be plagiarizing it, forgive me. It's this: the whatever generation. Ask a serious question, make a request, celebrate something, and you're likely to get a blank look and the w-word, "whatever." This bunch didn't invent cool cynicism,¹ it goes back at least to James Dean—and his movies were in black and white. There are even abbreviations, whatevs. It's a great way to dismiss a silly idea. When our world says the point of life is to make money, be famous, gratify our own desires, I want the surliest kid we can find to say, "whatever."

St. Paul uses the word "whatever" in this text I'm about to read. Whatever is good, holy, pure, right, we're to think on these things. Maggie Ross said the mark of a Christians is this, "a willingness for whatever." Whatever comes we'll see it as a chance to love God and neighbor more. Hear this word from St. Paul.

Php 4:1-13

1 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. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, to 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. 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, beloved, 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. 9 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.

This is my last shot at our series on Philippians, "Arriving." We, like the Philippians, like all Christians, are on a journey. We are not there yet. We are not nowhere and are not lost. We are on the way with Jesus and one another, and that's good enough for a thousand generations. This series fits with our church's new vision language. Our one word summary for what we're to be as a church

¹ <http://classiccinemagold.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/James-Dean.jpg>

is this, “Renewal.” We want to be part of God’s making all things new. We want to be made new in our own spiritual lives. Paul wants to be renewed too, he wants the Philippians renewed. And here’s how he expresses that.

First, Paul loves the Philippians. Almost too much.² Listen to him, “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 tells his listeners he loves them twice in one verse. In my training as a pastor, like those in most helping professions, I was taught to keep a little distance. We have to be a non-anxious presence. We can’t need those in our care nor let them need us. Got to preserve a little magic, keep yourself veiled, be cool, whatevs. Not Paul. He oozes with affection for the Philippians. I don’t know about your family, in mine growing up we said “I love you” a lot. Who knows when it’s the last time you’ll ever get to hear or say it? So too Paul. I knew my professional cool was busted last week when Johnny Carson, longtime huge hearted leader here, laid his hands on my back and prayed and I burst into tears. So much for cool reserve. It’s better this way. The church is a body in love with Jesus and so with one another. James Dean be gone.

Not only that. Paul calls the Philippians “my joy and crown.” A crown is an image of victory. In other words, Paul’s place in heaven depends on the Philippians’ holiness. Their place in heaven depends on his. We’re so used to thinking of religion as an individual thing, my heart, me and Jesus, my salvation. Not in Paul. Paul’s salvation is bound up with the Philippians. Theirs is bound up with his. The only way to get to God is with and through other people in love. It’s been said you only love God as much as you love your worst enemy. Sobering, isn’t it? Here’s the good news. We’re all in this together. The sanctuary is a ship, an ark, built like a big upside down boat. We’re all the animals inside. Safe from the storm out there, we might not can stand one another in here, but we’re still being saved despite ourselves by being on the boat.

The orphans we met in Rwanda last week get that we’re only saved with others. One young woman was head of a household of three siblings. She was doing well in the program. But then the social worker started noticing her falling asleep at work. She seemed hungry. She explored, and found this young head of household had taken in six more orphans. She learned they were on the street, covered with bug bites, hungry. And she saw herself and her siblings and couldn’t not take them in. So she just stretched the food for four to cover 10. No wonder she was tired and hungry. She saw those abandoned kids and saw herself and couldn’t not help. Lord make us as generous as a Rwandan orphan.

And if that’s too intimate try what Paul says next.³ “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, to 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.” Poor Euodia. Poor Synteché. These two women leaders are having a perfectly normal flap like all of us do and Paul calls them out in public in front of everyone. Imagine me saying, hey, Bob, and you, Charles, get along. In front of everyone! I’d never do that, don’t worry...This tells us a few things. One, women led in Paul’s churches. Never

² On screen plz

³ Php 4:2-3 on screen plz

let anyone tell you women weren't leaders in the ancient church, Paul names them by name. These women's leadership is compromised by their fighting. He wants them to stop. Here's why—they're part of one body. The thumb can't fight with the eyebrow, the liver can't fight with the toes. They need to work together. They may not like each other. Who cares? They have to love one another. And goodness is that ever hard.

Jean Paul Sartre famously said "hell is other people." Especially *certain* other people who get on your last nerve. Now imagine leading in the church with that person. Unpleasant, right? Paul tells them to "have the same mind." It's the same word he used in chapter two,⁴ "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . who emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." That person who gets on your last nerve is someone Jesus died to save, rose to make holy, and loves infinitely. Surely you can lead alongside them, right? No? Ok, be like Jesus, die for them. Pray for them. Love them. No one said Christianity was easy. Someone asked one of God's people on a subway train once, "Do you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" The wise man replied, "unfortunately, yes." This stuff is hard! To have the same mind means to follow Christ's pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting.ⁱ To have our whole lives revolutionized by Jesus.

Paul lays these leaders' dispute before the whole church. Their dislike is not private. It's public. If the leaders won't lead, the people will. Paul pays the Philippian church the compliment that they're mature enough to help their leaders get along.ⁱⁱ Imagine if I had a letter from our bishop, which said, alright, Boone Church, please see that Pastor Jason and Pastor Jeff stop fighting. Jesus reconciles the whole world—he'd better reconcile his preachers. Jeff and I would be embarrassed. But you'd have work to do, to patch things up between us. That's what Paul says here. If Jesus can die for his worst enemies—us sinners—surely we can figure out how to talk to one another kindly. And here's how to do it. They shouldn't pretend they like each other. They shouldn't hold their nose, grin and bear it. They should each become more like Jesus. And as they do they'll find themselves becoming more like one another.⁵ Here's an image of them, looking away from each other, pointing up as Jesus ascends. There's a start—looking at him and not one another.

A pastor friend of mine heard that a father and son in his church weren't speaking. He went to the father. "My son hates me," he said. Imagine the decades of hurt. He went to the son. "My dad hates me," he said. This didn't take a genius. The pastor said "brothers we have to talk!" They did. Past wounds were closed. Hurt feelings mended. They weren't besties over night. But they began again. Is there anything more beautiful than reconciliation?

Third point today, rejoice.⁶ "4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Rejoice always. Naturally I would get a passage like this this week. I've told many of you I've been struggling with back pain, might need surgery, pretty miserable. Scripture says rejoice. I feel like giving Paul a piece of my mind. "Do not worry about anything," Paul says. How is that even possible?

⁴ On screen Php 2:5 & 7

⁵ <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-rN5Yf9IGIDs/UbTKpxrDs1I/AAAAAABGJU/lo75gkPEZbw/s1600/Euodia+and+Syntyche.jpg>

⁶ On screen plz

Some thought systems or religions emphasize detachment. Stoicism in the ancient world wanted people to stay even keel no matter what happens. Buddhism, as far as I understand it which is not very much, suggests we detach from emotion, passion, attachment, that's the way to enlightenment. Paul is no stoic and Paul is no Buddhist. He's a Jew. I already told you he told the Philippians he loves them twice in one verse. He's as passionate as any red-blooded hothead. If Stoics and Buddhists are cool like felines Paul is a manic puppy, the farthest thing from cool. How can he say not to worry? One interpreter says it this way, "Worry is a sin born of mistrust."ⁱⁱⁱ I know I'm worried because I don't trust. I fear my back won't heal, and I won't be able to play basketball, hike, ski, travel. Here's the thing, what if God has something else he needs me to do that I need to be disabled for? I won't like it. But God will give the grace to handle it. We need to have a "willingness for whatever."⁷ Job says "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him," God can take his life and he will still praise. And maybe this is the way not to worry. It's to pray.⁸ "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Everything. I tend to think some things are too small for God. Little worries. Little needs. Not just my back but parking places, being on time, a friend who's forgotten us. Surely God is only worried about big things—violence in Ukraine, Syria, food and shelter for the poor. But no, Paul says "in *everything* let your requests be known." Here's why I think. If we pray for a parking place God will change our prayer to include the poor. If we pray for selfish things God will change our prayer for selfless ones. Just pray. About whatever comes to your heart. Ask God for what you want. And God will respond. Maybe not the way we want.⁹ Carlyle Marney used to say "God gives us what we want, after God changes our wanters around." And pretty soon in prayer we'll notice all we really pray for is more of God. All we ask for our friends is more of God. All prayer is an opening up to God. Parking places are a start. The peace of Christ is the end. One writer says it this way. *Worry at God*. Prayer is directing what would eat us up to God. Giving away what's loading us down.

Four, whatever.¹⁰ "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." This is really hard. The thoughts that pour forth from our mind are often chaotic, weird, things we can't control. Paul suggests we think on only good things, pure things, pleasing things, commendable things, excellent things. That we have the mind of Christ, like Euodia and Synteché. That's hard. I'll give some examples. I asked an esteemed religion scholar once whether he looks back over his life. In 80 years he's written 70 books, he's known worldwide, dined with presidents and popes. And he said no. "Nostalgia is uncreative. I don't do it." He finds it unhelpful to think back. End of story. Notice what he's done. He's disciplined himself to think in ways that are creative. Another time I spoke with a bishop, another renowned man. We discussed a mutual friend whose marriage had come apart after an affair. He shook his head. "It's no good. I can't think of it without getting judgmental." He rebuked me ever so gently. If we can't think of something without being judgmental why should we think of it at all? Our culture feeds us images of beauty that are a lie. Skinniness, air brushed perfection that would require

⁷ Job 13:15 on screen

⁸ On screen plz

⁹ Quote on screen plz

¹⁰ Php 4:8 on screen plz

starving oneself. We have to think differently—holiness is beautiful, not some false ideal that requires surgery. We have to think differently.

Friends this is so hard, to think only of good, holy, pure, helpful things. Our media is against it. In the news world, if it bleeds it leads. When we pass a wreck on the road we all rubber neck to see the carnage. We all like gossip for the same reason. Paul says don't. Have the mind of Christ. Christ looks on absolutely everyone with love. And he wants to invade all our lives and fill every inch of us with himself. Thoughts included. Here's how to do it. Think about Jesus. *He's* what's true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable. You can't drive out a negative with a negative, a bad thought with a wish, "Don't think that." You can only drive out something ugly with something beautiful. Or someone.

Another example from Rwanda. One group of orphans made a killing with a coffee crop. It was a banner year and they took home 10's of thousands of dollars (not francs) extra. If you want to ruin someone make them rich. So Zoe approached the kids with some ideas for what to do with the money. The orphans were confused. One finally spoke up. "We're not keeping this money. We're going to give it to other orphans." That's thinking differently than our world.

Five, imitate me. This is truly terrifying. Those of you working as confirmation mentors for our sixth graders know how humbling it is to have someone look up to you, imitate you. Paul says, "9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me." Paul constantly asks his churches to imitate him, as he imitates Christ. Here at Boone Methodist we're providing exemplars, models. Our young people imitate their mentors, those mentors imitate those of an older generation and so on back to Paul back to Jesus. The church is a big long game of follow the leader.

I caught a glimpse of this when our children's ministry went roller skating a year or so ago. Sarah Strickland, if I can pick on App's soccer coach, our new family life chair, saw my middle child was having trouble picking up skating. So she crouched down in front of him, while skating backwards mind you, and instructed him on how to do it. She got down on his level, talked him through it. That's who she is, a coach, she can't not coach. Instead of skating on her own or with her family she showed a little one how to do it. Sam imitated her and learned how to do it. In medicine when they teach surgery they say you see an operation first, then you do one, then you teach one. When you can teach it you got it. So too here. We are always in need of Sunday School teachers around here. But everyone's nervous they don't know enough. *Who does?* It's God we're talking about! But that's when you really learn, when you teach something. One reason I tell stories about each of you is so others will imitate you. That's what the church is, a vast crowd of models, exemplars, imitators of Jesus. And that's more than a little scary. Let's just say I hope my kids imitate some of you on the way to imitating Jesus rather than me.

There's only one reason this whole thing can work. One reason we can have the same mind, one reason Euodia and Synteche can get along, one reason we should rejoice whatever happens, one reason we can pray, one reason we can imitate one another on the way to imitating Christ. One

reason alone. It's tucked away there in verse five. Did you notice it? Here it is. You ready?¹¹ "The Lord is near." There's everything about Christianity, the whole shebang, in four words. The Lord is near. God is not an abstraction, an idea, something we wish for, try to white knuckle and make ourselves believe. God is near, as near as the veins and arteries keeping us alive right now, as near as the bulge in Mary's belly, as near as the flutter in your heart telling you to love an enemy, as near as a child imitating an admired mentor in church, as near as the nearest poor neighbor. The Lord is near. And that's everything.

I want to close with a letter written in the mid-90s by a Catholic monk in Algeria, portrayed in the movie *Of Gods and Men*.¹² Fundamentalists have overrun the Algerian village nearby and the monks know they're in danger. But they stay. Because God came near. So they'll stay near to their Muslim friends. Father Christian wrote a letter found after his death where he prayed this way. On his death some will say he was a fool, too idealistic, to love his enemies.

¹³But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free.
This is what I shall be able to do, God willing:
immerse my gaze in that of the Father
to contemplate with him his children of Islam
just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ.

Notice what he's saying here. Not that Christianity and Islam are the same deep down. No no no. But that he could see his Muslim friends and enemies as the God of Jesus Christ does, full of grace and truth. He closes with a prayer for the man who will kill him.

And also you, my last-minute friend, who will not have known what you were doing:
yes, I want this thank you and this goodbye to be a "God bless" for you, too.
because in God's face I see yours.
May we meet again as happy thieves in Paradise, if it please God, the Father of us both.
Amen. Inshallah.

Inshallah means "if God wills it." Or if I can translate for this generation, "whatever." Imagine murderer and murdered surprised to be reunited in the embrace of Jesus, who forgives all his enemies, even us. Amen.

ⁱ The language is Steve Fowl's.

ⁱⁱ It's Fred Craddock's observation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt Chandler

¹¹ On screen plz

¹² <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2011/02/25/arts/25GODS-span/GODS-articleLarge.jpg>

¹³ On screen plz