

Think About These Things

Philippians 4:1-9

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First Presbyterian, Luling

My parents used to watch the news every night before supper. I don't remember many specifics, but in those years, as in most years, there were wars and rumors of wars, conflicts, car accidents, natural disasters. All the things the TV news is interested in, because they think their audiences are interested in it. We would always turn the TV off after the weather report, because no one in the family was more interested in sports than they were in eating supper. We got the newspaper each day, and my dad read it. I remember that I learned to read silently by hanging over his shoulder, reading the headlines out loud. He suggested that it would be nice if I could read inside my head instead. What a revelation! But never did they tell me that I couldn't read the newspaper or listen to the TV news. I find myself wanting to protect our kids from the news, though.

What's the difference now? Sure, the world is overwhelming. This week has been more overwhelming than most. It's sobering, to understate it considerably, to watch a war begin. A big difference is that we can have the TV news on constantly, 24 hours a day. We essentially carry TVs around with us in our purses and pockets, and can watch those images over and over. Images of war and violence and terrorism. Human suffering, repeated over and over.

Humans were not meant to suffer in these violent ways. That's clear and the tragedy not just of our time, but of all time. Nor are humans meant to absorb and witness suffering repeatedly, constantly, over and over, even at the distance of our screens. Those who are experiencing violence are obviously and clearly suffering in a deeper and more traumatic way. I don't want to imply that their suffering is somehow equal to those who view it at a distance. But even those of us who view it at a distance can be traumatized by watching others suffer. It would be worrisome if it didn't bother us, because it would mean we had lost the compassion that God places within us.

Once we have the news running on a loop, it can be hard to turn away, hard to turn it off. It's designed that way, designed to keep us watching. But it's not always good for our souls to do so. It's not good for our souls to receive so much negativity without a counterbalance.

I rarely find Paul to be very good at clearly stating something. He uses far too many words and far too little punctuation. But here in this passage in

Philippians, it's pretty clear. "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."

Think about the good stuff. Dwell on the good stuff. Take account, make a list if necessary, of the good stuff.

This reminds me, here, of Mr. Rogers quote, on how to help children process a tragedy. "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people that are helping.'" Helpers are the good stuff. Think about the helpers. Think about the good stuff.

I was listening to a presentation by Austin Seminary's pastoral care professor last week. His presentation was on "flourishing," and he presented some recent research on "happiness" that I thought was interesting. I have no idea how a person would research happiness, or how to even define or measure it, but it's important enough that people are working on doing so. One thing he shared with us is that 50% of our happiness is genetic. How that gets teased out between nature and nurture is another question, but we seem to inherit about half of our happiness from our families. Only ten percent of our happiness comes from our life circumstances. The remaining forty percent comes from our actions and thoughts about our life circumstances. So 40% of our happiness is within our control.

It seems like Paul may have been right. Think on these good things, and at least 40% of our happiness can increase. Another researcher found that concentrating on positive emotions can in itself increase positive emotions. Thinking about good stuff can increase our happiness.

This sounds easy enough. But in Paul's time, and in our time, it's profoundly counter-cultural. It's more common and more acceptable and way easier to share bad news than good, to complain about our circumstances rather than be thankful, to dwell on the negative rather than on the positive. It's said to be Pollyanna, or naïve, or out of touch, or even uncaring about those who suffer, to think about the good stuff.

Maybe it might have been easier for the Philippians, but not by much. If it were easy, Paul wouldn't have had to remind them to do it. This is his closing paragraphs of the letter, urging them to all kinds of positive thoughts and behaviors: rejoice, rejoice, give thanks, keep on doing the things I've taught you.

I deeply believe that it is good for us to think about the good things, to be thankful. But if it stops at just thinking about good things, for our own benefit

alone, well then, that can get pretty selfish. Thinking about the good things must lead to doing the good things, must lead to making good things possible for all people.

Our neighbors in Israel and Gaza and the whole Middle East are not able to think about the good things right now. God's call to us is to make a world where they can. The peace of God, that Paul talks about twice in this passage, is not just for us. It's for the whole world.

And one more thing, that I've been struggling with myself this week. I've had to tell myself, and people I care about, to turn the news off, to quit reading news stories, to quit refreshing the website for the latest update. I know it's good for me to not constantly expose myself to horror. I know it's good to think about the good stuff. But it also can feel like I'm turning aside from suffering, that I'm not bearing witness, that I want to pretend the horror isn't happening. Nothing I can do will stop the horror, but that doesn't mean I can pretend it's not there. It also doesn't mean that I have to soak in it.

When there comes a time, or a place, that we can be of help, that we can make a world where God's peace is more visible, then we who are not directly affected by the horror must be ready, must be emotionally prepared and healthy, to work for peace. And one way we do that is by thinking about these things, the whatever's Paul describes: true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellence, praise-worthy.

Think about these things, so we can fill the world with these things, and the God of peace will be with us.