

Whatever
Sermon on Philippians 4:1-9 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, October 9, 2005

The English language is a rapidly changing one. I am becoming increasingly aware that I no longer speak conventional English, which basically means that I speak in such a way that what I say is no longer intelligible to the average person under age 22. Whereas I learned that in proper speech one conjoins subject, verb, and direct object with accompanying adjectives and adverbs, contemporary English prizes economy above all else. Hence the verbs to express statements, questions, or exclamations become not “I said”, “I asked”, or “I exclaimed”, but “I was like,” as in “I was like, ‘You got an A on your test? No way!’” Similarly, the statement, “I am unconcerned with your predicament” becomes, “Whatever.”

Whereas “whatever” formerly had the noble use to convey imprecision—“take whatever you need,” “whatever merit my words have”—now young people use the term primarily to indicate indifference to a state of affairs or a situation. When used with a wave of the hand or a roll of the eyes, “whatever” expresses annoyance, impatience, or simply a disinclination to engage the matter at hand (as it were). How does the OU fan, for instance, respond to yesterday’s trouncing by UT? “Whatever.”

Christianity is the opposite of “whatever.” Christianity is the way of life of a people who worship the God that created the world and is intimately involved in it. This God is constantly in conversation with the people he made and intruding in the world in small ways and large to see to it that his will is done. This is a God who cannot leave well enough—or should I say bad enough?—alone. This is a God who desperately desires obedience and faithfulness, who has come among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to teach us who and what we should be like. This is a God who never says, “Whatever.”

Take Euodia and Syntyche, for example. These were two fine, upstanding churchwomen who had “struggled together” alongside Paul in “the work of the gospel.” They had become leaders in the church at Philippi. And, as sometimes happens in church, these leaders had had a disagreement. We don’t know why they disagreed or what caused the fight. Maybe in a heated moment at a trustees meeting, one said something, the other heard only half of that, and feelings got hurt. Whatever the cause of their disagreement, Paul urged them to put it behind them and to “be of the same mind in the Lord” (Php. 4:2).

We might not think much of quarrels in church or fights among the members, but they are in fact quite serious. This dispute between Euodia and Syntyche “was a threat to the unity of the church as a whole.”¹ These women were, after all, leading members of the Christian community where, as Tom Wright says, “the whole ethos ought to be one of mutual love, forgiveness, and support.”² Failing to resolve the differences between these leaders threatened to compromise the Philippian church’s witness to its neighbors.

When he heard about the fight, Paul could have said, “Whatever. I don’t care. Let them have at each other.” But God takes notice when we disagree with our brothers and sisters in the faith. Disagreements in church aren’t good. We are to be united in the gospel. And so Paul calls on members of the congregation to urge that the women be reconciled “because he expects the church to help with the healing.” Paul does not leave it to the women to work out their differences in private because he sees the church as the place where healing happens. As Fred Craddock says, “Being members of one another means laying before each other joys, sorrows, and burdens, but also issues to be settled.”³ We are to be of the same mind in the Lord so that

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, New Int’l Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989) 138.

² N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters—Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 129.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985) 70.

others may see our unity in Christ. When the unity of the church is at stake, “whatever” is not an option.

Neither is “whatever” an option when it comes to prayer. God is not uninterested in our prayers or disinclined to get involved. I confess that I don’t pray like I believe that. I tend to worry. I worry that God is too busy to listen to me or that God simply doesn’t care. I worry that God may listen to me and be tempted to say, “Whatever.” “Do not worry about anything,” Paul says, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (4:6).

How can Paul say “Do not worry”? How can a person not worry when gas is as expensive as it is and when there may not be enough flu vaccine just when a major flu outbreak is occurring around the world and when hurricanes, mudslides, and earthquakes are killing thousands of people in this and other countries?

Paul can say, “Do not worry” because of what he knows to be true: “The Lord is near” (4:5b). John Koenig explains that ‘The Lord is near’ is “an affirmation of faith that Christ will soon return from heaven to set all things right,” as well as an assurance that Christ is present with us as we try to live out the demands of the gospel.⁴ ‘The Lord is near’ can refer to nearness in place as well as to nearness in time. What Paul means here is that “the Lord is always equally near his people.”⁵ Because the Lord is both coming to vindicate his people at the last day and is present with us here and now, there is no need to be nervous or obsessively anxious about our own well-being. Rather than worry, Paul instructs us to offer our worries up to God, to make our requests known to God. God knows our needs before we even ask (Mt. 6:8). And so in all seasons of life we offer our prayers to God with thanksgiving, because gratitude and joy at

⁴ Edgar Krentz, John Koenig, and Donald H. Juel, *Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 173.

⁵ Bruce, 143.

receiving shape how we ask for things. We can come to God in prayer confident that God will answer. Paul does not say that we will get “direct, immediate, and recognizable answers,”⁶ but he does say that prayer can be offered in sure confidence that God’s care is always with us. God never answers prayer with “Whatever.”

The only “whatever” God has any part of is “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable” (Php. 4:8). “If there is any excellence,” says Paul, “and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (4:8). True things, honorable things, just things, pure things, pleasing things, commendable things—these are hard to come by in a “whatever” world. What is true “has the moral qualities of uprightness and dependability.” What is honorable is what is morally good or dignified. What is just is what is righteous as God is righteous. What is pure is undefiled and chaste. What is pleasing is intrinsically attractive and agreeable. What is commendable is that which is praiseworthy or deserving of a good reputation.

When Paul says “think on these things” he does not mean to reflect on them, and perhaps admire them, only to live a “whatever” life; he means “reflect upon and allow these qualities of living to shape your conduct.”⁷ Being truthful, honorable, just and the like are not virtues unique to Christianity. In fact, Paul probably copied this list of virtues out of the standard ethics textbooks of his day. In Christ, however, these virtues take on a new dimension because Christ embodied each of them. And so as people claimed and saved and transformed by Christ, we can no longer live the “whatever” life. We are to learn what is pure and pleasing and commendable, and “Keep on doing the things that [we] have learned and received and heard and seen” (4:9) in models of faith like Jesus and Paul.

⁶ Craddock, 72.

⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1980) 157.

And so let there be no disagreements among us; let us be of the same mind in the Lord. Let us make our requests known to God with supplication and thanksgiving, confident that God will answer us. Let us think about and do whatever is true and honorable, whatever is just and pure, whatever is pleasing and commendable. Let us, like Jesus and like Paul, live God's "whatever" life.