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“Gimmers” - Philippians 4:1-9

There is no better front of a Hallmark card than this passage, right? Perhaps you've received or even given someone who was going through a hard time a beautiful, flowery card that said these very words. Maybe you've passed by an aisle at Hobby Lobby peppered with this phrase on pillows and picture frames, or even bought a wooden sign of this scripture reference to hang in your office. Do not worry about anything! But in prayer and supplication and with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all your understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. To this modern, western audience, Paul is sounding like the best positive, motivational life coach that money can buy. When he's instructing this community to think about things that are true, honorable, just, pure pleasing, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy — it's just simply beautiful language. And yet, is life really that simple? Does this passage of scripture withstand the test of time? Can we read these optimistic, hopeful, flowery words in the midst of a raging war in Palestine and Israel that has already claimed thousands of lives, global poverty and food insecurity, anti-Semitism, a climate crisis, continued polarization as our country prepares for election season, just to name a few issues. Not to mention each one of us walked in this sanctuary this morning hauling an internal suitcase of issues weighing heavy on our hearts. Is Paul simply teaching us the power of positive thinking, or is there something deeper going on here?

To understand the full picture of Paul's language and rhetoric across many of his letters, we need to understand the context in which he was educated, and ultimately the circumstances that led to this particular time and place. Paul is writing this letter, sitting alone in a prison cell. He's awaiting a trial that he fears will end in his own execution. In other letters, we can tell that he has a good bit of worry about the spiritual health and vitality of some of the young communities of faith he has started. We can't really assume that he's particularly happy. And yet, Paul fills this short letter with 14 references to rejoicing and joy. We don't know if Paul is well-fed or hungry, if he's safe or if he feels like he's in imminent danger. We don't know if he feels threatened by powerful people, if he feels lonely or despondent. Somehow, he's able to write to this community of people, encouraging them to rejoice no matter the circumstance.

I'm a firm believer that people say and do what they know, and Paul's Greco-Roman philosophical influence is definitely something we should consider. Growing up as a Hellenized Jew in Tarsus, Paul's education would have been just as Greco-Roman as it was Jewish, and it's safe to say that he was highly influenced by the stoic philosophy of his time. The stoics taught how to have an inner state of tranquility so that you could maintain a sort of stubborn indifference to good or bad circumstances. If we take that perspective a bit further, joy and peace aren't really based on pleasurable experiences. Rather, it's just a byproduct of aligning your thoughts and actions with this sort of virtue. This letter also resembles the stoic literary format of consolation letters, which were not intended to send sympathy as we do when we console others. In his book "Consolation in Phillipians," religion scholar Paul Holloway explains that the stoics "were by no means unsympathetic to those afflicted with grief; however, they understood their primary task to be not one of sharing in the grief of others, but one of removing that grief by rational argument and frank exhortation." Choosing joy in the midst of suffering became second nature for Paul and became central to his teaching about living a life in Christ. The thing that separates the stoics from Paul is the way that they process the ability to reason. When Paul speaks of Christ, the stoics speak of reason, and ultimately Paul's inner sense of tranquility within the confines of this prison cell is coming from his relationship with God which gives him peace.

I have to admit that in the past, I have thoroughly enjoyed dismissing Paul. And it would be easy for me to do that here! I'm sure we're all well aware that his words have been weaponized against women in ministry for centuries, being unfairly used as an iron-clad argument for keeping men in power, keeping men as the leaders of the church, the pastors, the deacons, ultimately silencing women. However, it is fascinating that the same folks who argue against women serving in pastoral roles, conveniently forget about these two women that Paul mentions, kind of as an aside in this letter. It's an "oh by the way!" moment. Euodia & Syntyche are co-ministers with Paul, respected leaders within the Phillipian community. These are just two female ministry partners, but we read later in Paul's benediction in Roman's his co-ministers Tryphena and Tryphosa, Apollos in Corinth, Mary and Martha of the gospels, the list goes on and on.

In addition to the ways his words have been used against women in ministry, I also want to dismiss Paul's words here because I am a worrier. I've been battling anxiety since my early twenties, and with the help of a good therapist and medication, I can keep most of my worst-case scenario thinking at bay. I'm not

sure if I will ever live a life without some sort of lingering worry. It is a part of me like my blue eyes, my size 11 feet, and my laugh that is often followed by a snort. Anxiety is not who I am, but it is something I live with that intensifies during certain seasons of life. If you have ever had any kind of anxiety, you will most certainly read this letter a little differently.

In a 2016 blogpost entitled anxiety, Frederick Buechner describes it this way: “Is anxiety a disease or an addiction? Perhaps it is something of both. Partly, perhaps, because you can't help it, and partly because for some dark reason you choose not to help it, you torment yourself with detailed visions of the worst that can possibly happen. The nagging headache turns out to be a malignant brain tumor. When your teenage son fails to get off the plane you've gone to meet, you see his picture being tacked up in the post office among the missing and his disappearance never accounted for. As the latest mid-East crisis boils, you wait for the TV game show to be interrupted by a special bulletin to the effect that major cities all over the country are being evacuated in anticipation of nuclear attack. If Woody Allen were to play your part on the screen, you would roll in the aisles with the rest of them, but you're not so much as cracking a smile at the screen inside your own head.”

Several years ago, I was traveling on a flight to Dallas, Texas, for CBF General Assembly. I was sitting across the aisle from an older man who was reading a book on gardening. His legs were crossed, reading glasses perched at the tip of his nose, sipping a cup of coffee in his cable knit sweater, and he had the most relaxed body posture one can have sitting in a tiny seat on an airplane. He might as well have been sitting on a beach, he just looked absolutely delighted reading this gardening book. Suddenly, the weather changed, and our plane hit some pretty severe turbulence. Now, I've already told you about my gut reaction to worst-case scenario thinking, so you can imagine where my mind goes when I'm on a plane that has turbulence — full-on panic. And I looked over at my aisle mate, and he couldn't be bothered by this. He didn't even look up from his gardening book, just continued to read, adjusted the way he was holding his coffee to allow for sloshing, and that was it. We were bumping out of our seats, and this man just continued to read! In a few minutes the turbulence stopped, and our flight was smooth the rest of the way into Dallas. I'll never forget the peaceful look on this man's face. He had no clue how much his very demeanor affected me that day, but I think back and wonder — did he not care? In my mind, this plane was going down! Perhaps he had been on so many flights throughout his life, that he trusted the pilot knowing that the turbulence would eventually subside. Perhaps he was worried,

and I mistook his serene look for something else. I do have to remind myself that we don't all wear our every thought on our face! Whatever the reason, there was an unflappable, unshakable, inner peace inside of this man that still inspires me to this day.

In psychology, there's a term that you've probably heard called a "trigger." A trigger is a stimulus, a sensory reminder of a painful memory or trauma - it can be a sound, sight, smell, conversation, physical sensation, or even a time of day or season of the year. For example, the sound of fireworks can be a trigger for combat veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress disorder. The sight of a certain type of dog, can be a trigger for a person who was bitten as a child. Trauma affects each person differently, and the exact same event can cause two people to respond in completely different ways. When the brain is triggered, it associates past traumatic events as if they're happening right now, leading to a bodily response of being on high alert — rapid heartbeat, fight-or-flight mode.

In her book, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy*, licensed clinical social worker Deb Dana coined a phrase called a "glimmer." What's a glimmer? It's the exact opposite of a trigger — it's a cue, either internally or externally that brings someone a sense of joy, peace, and safety. Glimmers feel a little different in everyone's bodies, but generally it's a warm-fuzzy feeling. It's a mental snapshot, where you stop and take in a moment of deep joy. Some of my glimmers this past week — the cool crisp air when I step in my back yard first thing in the morning, my first sip of coffee, my husband texting "I love you" in the middle of the day; a podcast on my commute that makes me laugh so hard that I'm crying. My greatest and smallest teacher of glimmers is my son, who slows me down enough every single day to stop and notice a million little moments of joy — a yellow flower on our walk, the sound of a truck rumbling by, a tiny ladybug crawling up our front steps — he announces all these things and his face just lights up with astonishment. Just yesterday, after the rain he found every mud puddle in our yard, stomping around in his t-shirt and diaper, covered in mud and he stopped, looked at me and said, "I'm happy." Glimmers.

In his book, *Finding My Way Home*, Henri Nouwen says "Learn the discipline of being surprised not by suffering but by joy. As we grow old . . . there is suffering ahead of us, immense suffering, a suffering that will continue to tempt us to think that we have chosen the wrong road. . . . But don't be surprised by pain. Be surprised by joy, be surprised by the little flower that shows its beauty in the midst

of a barren desert, and be surprised by the immense healing power that keeps bursting forth like springs of fresh water from the depth of our pain.”

In the October edition of the *Christian Century*, editor and Lutheran pastor Peter Marty tells a story about a man named Mike that had been attending his church off-and-on for year. You couldn't miss Mike in the church on Sunday, walking around with his white mobility cane. Mike had been blind since birth, and he had a friend that helped him get around at church, making sure he was able to get from the car to the sanctuary to his seat. One Sunday, Peter stood at the back door greeting after worship, and Mike walked up and without even thinking Peter said, “Mike, it's so great to see you today!” Mike responded, “Well, pastor, it's good to see you too!” He walked away, and Peter was just kicking himself, ashamed that he framed a conversation around sight to a man who would not see. And then he was equally as puzzled at Mike's response — why was he delighted to see him?

Peter wanted to spend some more time with Mike, so later that week he went out to see him at his home. Peter learned that Mike had melanoma, and he was in a bit of a crisis due to a new medication he was taking. His chemotherapy had run its course, and this new medication was stripping Mike of the feeling in his fingertips. As you can imagine, his fingertips were critical to his independence, allowing him to read braille, which was becoming increasingly more difficult by the day. Peter said they moved quickly from heavy, hard conversations to lighter ones. Eventually Mike told Peter, “I just love to garden in the summer, there are so many beautiful flowers, did you see my garden when you came in?” All throughout the New Testament, Jesus shows steady interest in blind people, and it does make me wonder if he's pushing followers to see truth beyond, below, and around what we can see with our own eyes. Clearly, Mike had this gift, which was why he was able to say, “great to see you too, pastor.”

Friends, if you have heard this verse thousands of times, and the peace that Paul is talking about seems almost illusive...If you look around at the world and say, how on earth do I NOT worry? If you keep waiting for peace to flood through your life and it's just not happening, take heart, you are not alone. I think Paul knew that it was likely impossible to experience a life with the absence of any kind of worry. And yet, I'm not sure that was ever the goal in the first place. Paul says, “in everything” whatever circumstance, keep on praying, keep on asking, keep on thanking. The worst things will surely happen no matter what, they always do, and we never even see them coming. What would happen if we stopped waiting for a

worry-free, drama-free, Utopia-like life, and we started taking in small moments of joy as little offerings of peace?

Last week, we went to the park and Jennings wanted to swing. So, I put him on the swing and as soon as I started pushing him he started chanting “go high, go high!” Now, you need to know that for months Jennings was terrified of the swing — it’s a very recent thing that he loves going high. So, I pushed him a little bit higher and he just squealed with delight, laughing his little head off. And in between these squeals he starts saying, “I’m scared!” So, I slowed him down thinking that I’ve pushed him too high...and then he starts up again, “go high, go high!” He tossed his head back in the wind, laughing — now alternating between, “I’m scared!” and “go high!” ... “I’m scared!” “Go high!” And in that moment I realized that there was really nothing I could do to protect him from his own little worry. I couldn’t control his fear. I knew he was safe, and I saw his little internal struggle of wanting to experience the thrill and joy of swinging high and being a little bit afraid. Me too, Buddy, me too.