

Cindy Voth
Waterford Mennonite Church
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Philippians 4:8-9
“Vitamin Awe”

I remember growing up on the farm back in Ohio. My father was a fulltime farmer and my mother worked nights as a nurse at the local hospital. My mother has since retired but my dad keeps working the ground year after year, a man who lives his faith with each and every seed he plants.

Well growing up we were taught that we should take care of our bodies as they were temples of God. This translated into conversations regarding drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, and the importance of enough sleep. This also meant that I have memories of being a young child and being given chewable Flintstone vitamins. And always they were, chewable Flintstone vitamins. I remember that I did not particularly enjoy said vitamins as they were not delicious and left a nasty taste in my mouth. And yet my parents assured me that they were good for me and my body.

Fast forward several decades... as I live into my Crohn's diagnosis, a couple months ago, I was sitting at my parents' table back in Ohio when my sister-in-law, a registered dietitian, asked me, “So Cindy, as you begin your treatment what kinds of vitamins are you taking to boost your immune system and aid in the overall health of your body?” I immediately thought of those disgusting Flintstone vitamins and wanted to laugh. I simply responded, “So yeah, about those vitamins. Not so much. Yet.” I now take eight vitamins each day (thankfully I just swallow them and there is no chewing or tasting involved!) which hopefully are helping boost my compromised immune system and replace any nutrients I fail to ingest in my food.

Well today I'm not here to challenge you all to rush out and buy a multivitamin or a specialized vitamin. Instead I want to talk about the importance of a daily dose of vitamin awe. I borrow this term from Mennonite Peace and Reconciliation Educator and practitioner, John Paul Lederach. Vitamin awe. I believe that this is what Paul is writing about to the church in Philippi. Turn with me our dwelling in the word passage, Philippians 4.

During the month of November we are dwelling with these familiar verses from Philippians chapter 4. Last week Pastor Katie focused on verses 6 and 7 as she spoke about the fear monster and our calling to go to prayer when we are anxious. This morning then we move to focusing on the last two verses, verses 8 and 9.

As we look at these verses we note that verse 8 begins with the word "Finally" which links it to a previous passage. These verses do not occur within a vacuum but instead of part of a larger literary piece in Paul's letter. If we look back up to the first verse of this chapter we read, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters... stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!" The next verses then expound on Paul's understanding and teaching for ways the believers at Philippi could stand firm in the Lord.

Within our unit for this month Paul articulates that to stand firm we are called to rejoice in the Lord always. Rejoice. Let our gentleness be evident. Do not be anxious. To pray with thanksgiving. To be deliberate and intentional about what we think about. And... as we stand firm in the Lord the peace of God will be with us, guarding our hearts and our minds.

So, verses 8 and 9 should be understood as a continuation of Paul's final instruction and encouragement. These verses are held together with the calling to rejoice, be gentle, do not be anxious, and to pray with thanksgiving. Today then Paul adds two more actions to his final exhortation – to think and to act.

In verse eight we read, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” The Greek word that is translated *to think on these things* is a strong word and a favorite one of the Apostle Paul’s. It means “to reckon, calculate, take into account,” and as a result “to evaluate” a person, thing, quality or event. It includes also within the range of its meaning the ideas of “to ponder or let one’s mind dwell on” something.”ⁱ This verb does not imply “dreamy meditation... but an intentional inventory-taking of where the Philippians have experienced such things.”ⁱⁱ

Paul provides an extensive list of what we should be considering. I suspect that hearing the various words bring different images and experiences to mind. Paul was ahead of the game! Just think about how many self-help books have been written on the power of positive thinking! And here is Paul telling the believers at Philippi that it matters what we choose to think about, dwell on. Paul is not talking about just fleeting thoughts that fly through our heads like hummingbirds flittering to one flower to the next. Instead he is arguing that what we allow ourselves to dwell on matters. What we choose to focus our thoughts on matters. What we bring to mind and allow to set up home within our consciousness matters. Paul makes the case that it matters as it is directly connected to our calling to stand firm in the Lord as well as in our desire to experience the peace of God guarding our hearts and our minds.

Perhaps we could understand Paul as saying “Friends, your mind is powerful and what you allow it to dwell on will inform and transform your outlook, your attitude, your perspective, and ultimately your life experiences. You are the gatekeeper to what you allow your mind to focus on, dwell on, and ruminate on. Be sure that what you allow into the depth of who you are

leads you to name and celebrate that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.”

The power of Paul’s choice of verb communicates the understanding that this is something that will take intentionality and our focus. The Philippians were surrounded by the Roman Empire and understood war, betrayal, violence, and greed. They were not living in this idyllic environment that was void of heartache, pain, destruction, or disease. In the face of real life Paul instructs the followers of Jesus to rejoice, be gentle, be prayerful, be thankful, *be deliberate on what they think about*. Paul says stand firm in the Lord, in your identity in Jesus, in your salvation and hope of resurrection that is both here and not fully here yet. And he says, train your mind to think on the good, the lovely, the beautiful.

Paul says the next step in standing firm is to think, and then finally in verse 9 he challenges us to act by putting into practice what we have learned. There is a progression to this passage. It leads us through various calls of actions and responses. Then it ends with the reminder to allow this process of rejoicing, praying, and thinking to transform our actions and witness in the world by putting it all into practice. And, Paul writes, the God of peace will be with you.

Well, how easy is it for you to change what you find yourself dwelling on? How easy is it for you to look at the world around and pick out those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy? Does anyone find this extremely easy? If so, please tell us your secrets! Instead, in the same way that Paul needed to tell the Philippians to rejoice always, and pray with thanksgiving, they (and we!) need to hear the difficult challenge to filter that which we dwell on. It is a process of transformation. It is a spiritual discipline. It does take work.

Two weeks ago today I had a mishap on the stairs as I was carrying a table. The short story is that I thought I was done with the stairs but apparently I was not. After a trip to the ER, followed by a visit with the orthopedic surgeon it was determined that I had sprained my ankle and managed to have a fracture on the top of my foot. The result is this lovely boot and restricted activity for 6 weeks. Now, the sky is not falling. A broken foot is not a death sentence. There could have been much worse scenarios after following down a couple steps. However, this was added to an already fairly recent diagnosis of Crohn's and beginning to receive medication infusions. Furthermore, prior to the fall I was just starting to feel better with more energy and had just increased my daily running with the hopes of beginning to train for a longer race this spring. And then a simple misstep and poof. My daily life looks different. Drastically different? Nope. However, for the first six days I threw a pretty fantastic pity party. It felt like many were invited to my party – some by invitation and others by forced proximity to me. I was Eeyore. Woe is me.

For six days I choose to dwell on what I had lost, not just for my foot but also for my overall health journey with Crohn's. The waves of grief were real. The pain was extensive. The anger was intense. How much is enough, God?

Then a week ago Friday I was home reading a book Pastor Velma recommended to the team: "Dancing with Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living with Dementia, Chronic Illness or an Aging Brain." It is written by Jarem Sawatsky who while living with Huntington's disease was forced to retire from working at age 41. Sawatsky, a graduate of Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, is committed to dying well, and helping others learn to dance with the elephants in their life.

In the book there is a chapter entitled “Living the Life You’ve Got.” This chapter includes a conversation he had with Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn works in the area of mindfulness and stress reduction, especially with those facing chronic pain or illness. So here I am on that Friday morning at home, still well in the midst of my pity party, when I read the following: Sawatsky quotes Kabat-Zinn,

From our perspective, no matter what diagnosis you come with or what’s wrong with you, there is more right with you than wrong with you – no matter what is “wrong with you.” (Sawatsky wrote) It felt like someone just smacked me on my head and I fell awake. More right with me than wrong with me? The man speaking knows I have Huntington’s disease. In fact, he has spent his whole career working with people who have chronic and terminal diagnoses... he has helped thousands of people who are facing profound suffering. (and yet) He kept saying it throughout our conversation: “If you are not dead yet – people, as long as you are breathing, from our perspective (big smile) there is more right with you than is wrong with you, no matter what is wrong with you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For that past week I was quite skilled at listing and focusing on everything that is wrong with me that I failed to see or name or dwell on the things that are right. Oh, how often do we do this? We do this both with our personal lives and bodies, and we do it with our communities, our nation, and our world. In this heightened political era, in hearing catastrophic news within minutes of it occurring anywhere in the world, in the land of the fearful and those full of hate... it is easy to only see, name, and dwell on all that is wrong.

Now don’t get me wrong. There is a lot that is wrong. There is violence, war, destruction, devastation, abuse, greed, grief, and more. **And** there are things that are right, true, noble, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. What do we focus on, dwell on, ponder, and take deep within us? What do we allow to transform our thinking which then transforms how we engage with the world around us as followers of Jesus?

Well in his book Sawatsky also has a chapter where he interviews John Paul Lederach. Lederach was a former teacher of Sawatsky, however, he reaches out to Lederach to talk with him about what life is like now living with his beloved wife Wendy who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. In the book Lederach describes the disease this way: "This is not a disease that is a lightning strike like cancer. It is like winter creeping in."^{iv} Sawatsky challenges Lederach to consider how one holds onto faith and experiences peace in the midst of chronic illness. Lederach's reply is to encourage everyone to get their daily dose of Vitamin Awe. He describes it this way:

Faith is also about a sense of awe that is captured in the mystery of the extraordinary gift of life and the world we were born into... We need a daily dose of vitamin awe. We tend to see awe as something that we experience once a year... I don't know why we don't have it as a core practice... I don't think there are a lot of remedies for the winter creep (of this disease) other than vitamin awe. With vitamin awe, everything pops open and becomes alive again. Cultivating awe is a form of mindfulness. Awe is there and present in almost everything around us every day, but we so rarely touch it.^v

So this week I began to ask, "How does one begin to embrace their daily dose of vitamin awe?" I believe it begins by moving to intentional practices that foster and articulate gratitude. In this week of Thanksgiving I bet that many of us are going to find ourselves around a table and at some point being asked the question "What are you grateful for this year?" I would ask that question a little bit differently today – "What do you find true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy?" Scientific research shows that those who learn to express daily gratitude are healthier, happier, and report lower stress levels. This happens in part because expressing gratitude has been shown to activate the part of the brain that regulates stress and produces the sensation of pleasure.^{vi} Expressions of gratitude usually also move us to look beyond ourselves to the others and the world around us. It helps us become other focused.

I believe that gratitude becomes the hinge for us to move to pondering those things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. It is gratitude that propels us to see the gifts around us and to name them, dwell on them, and express our gratefulness for them. I also believe that this list from Paul helps us dig deeper into the realm of gratitude. What do you name as lovely? What in the world do you see that is praiseworthy? For what noble acts do you give thanks?

I agree with Kabat-Zinn. There **is** more right with each of us, then wrong with us. There **is** more right in this world, then wrong with it. Do we see it? Are we able and willing to celebrate it?

I pause here to add a significant disclaimer. This sermon is not trying to tell you that you should never dwell on or feel the pain, the suffering, the grief that floods your soul, our community, our nation, or our world. Nor am I asking you to put on rose colored glasses and live your lives in such a way that brushes off any recognition or lament for all that is wrong in your life or is wrong in this world. **Instead, as a follower of Jesus I believe our calling is to learn the sacred and holy act of holding both pain and gratitude. Both lament and that which is lovely. Both sorrow and that which is praiseworthy.**

So on that Friday, when I read this and received a wake-up call from my pity party, did all the grief, pain, and sorrow of a broken foot and new journey with Crohn's suddenly just evaporate? Absolutely not. The waves continue to come. Did my perspective begin to change? Absolutely. Did I experience God's presence and peace in a new way? Absolutely.

Sometimes though in the dark days of pain, grief, or sorrow we are unable to hold all of that and hold space for also naming that which is lovely. It is in those times that we as the community must surround each other and hold that space for each other until the other can hold

the two again. It is saying I will sing for you until you can sing again. I will pray for you until you can pray again. I will name and claim what is lovely in your life until you are able to see it again. I will hold the space of pain and hope until you can claim it as your own.

With the presence of gratitude we are able to pivot ourselves to also seeing those things of beauty within and without. We are able to see that there is more right than wrong. We are able to reach for and celebrate a daily dose of vitamin awe... awe for what is lovely, beautiful, true, and noble. Awe for something that is right, very right, in the world around us. Something as small as a caterpillar slowly crossing the sidewalk, to something larger as how Pastor Katie shared of our Mennonite brothers and sisters holding space for their Jewish friends, to something enormous as offering awe for God's forgiveness and grace. Things that inspire awe... and gratitude.

In just a moment you are invited to come forward to select a leaf to write or draw your answer to what do you find around you that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy? What will you focus on and ponder this week of Thanksgiving? Then you are invited to put the leaf somewhere around the base of the empty tree. This time of year trees drop their leaves in preparation for winter... and those leaves then end up decomposing and providing nutrients to the tree. In a similar way, Paul is saying what we choose to dwell on will provide us nutrients, like vitamin awe, that will transform our thoughts and actions. May it be so.

ⁱ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (Word Books, Publisher: Waco, Texas), 187.

ⁱⁱ Troy Troftgruben, "Commentary Philippians 4: 1-9,"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3444

ⁱⁱⁱ Jarem Sawatsky, *Dancing with Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living with Dementia, Chronic Illness or an Aging Brain* (Red Canoe Press: Winnipeg, Canada), 43-44.

^{iv} Sawatsky, *Dancing with Elephants*, 159.

^v Sawatsky, *Dancing with Elephants*, 160-161.

^{vi} https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/opinion/sunday/choose-to-be-grateful-it-will-make-you-happier.html?_r=0