**Stand Firm in the Lord**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

October 11, 2020

Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church

Seaside, Oregon

***It*** is thought St. Paul enjoyed a closer relationship with the Philippians congregation than with any other. In his letter to them he expresses his love and gratitude, thanks them for the financial support they sent him, and he makes a heartfelt appeal for a spirit of unity and steadfastness among them, warning them against prevailing threats to their shared beliefs and the practices of their faith community.

At the core of Paul’s message to the Philippians, however, is his call for a profound experience of joy to be had among them, assuring them that the fruits of joy will abound with much rejoicing in any and all circumstances. And how did Paul think such joy possible? Because true and enduring joy is a gift from God to those who *together* stand firm in the Lord.

And how does Paul suggest a congregation stand firm in the Lord? For certainly, we at Our Saviour’s Seaside also want to know how we can stand firm in the Lord in this dangerous and troubling year of 2020. Given the pandemic threat to our health and the health of our loved ones; Given the social and political unrest in our country; And given the catastrophic effects of climate change that has recently filled the very air we breathe here on the coast with dangerous pollutants leaving us all wondering how many more lives, homes, businesses and whole communities are going to be casualties of a warming planet? Yes, given all this and how all these things have halted, severely limited, and otherwise turned the fellowship and practices of our beloved congregation on its ear, just how, pray tell, yes, tell us how St Paul you think we can stand firm in the Lord at such a time as this, the year of our Lord, 2020?

Well, in fact, in this short passage from his letter to the Philippians Paul provides us a host of helpful suggestions, in fact they are emphatic urgings, to help Christians under duress stand firm in the Lord with joy and rejoicing. After you hear them briefly laid out for you this morning, you may want to turn to them again and again in these days leading up to the elections and well beyond.

So, how does Paul suggest we stand firm in the Lord with much joy and rejoicing? Hold onto your hat because Paul blows his readers away with no fewer than nine powerful directives, all found in this one short section of his letter to the Philippians:

# 1

Paul clearly indicates that we do not face what threatens us alone. Look at how Paul addresses the people of the church. He writes, “brothers and sisters” whom I love in the Lord and long to be with. Separated from them due to extenuating circumstances, Paul finds a creative way to stay connected. He takes to writing a letter to them, assuring them of his love and support.

Haven’t you been amazed how since March, when the coronavirus first laid siege upon us, there have arisen so many creative ways to link with others. Live streaming of worship services, Zoom meetings online, FaceTime by phone and cards and stationary flying off the shelves and sent to family and friends. My granddaughter Zoe was born last July in Seattle and while I wasn’t allowed into the hospital I was able to stand in front of a hospital room window and with phone in hand I could see, hear and talk to my daughter Brooke, son-in-law Cory, and sweet little Zoe.

Throughout the pandemic I have met with my four siblings, who happen to live in very different places all over the country, practically every Sunday afternoon. Closeness of this kind and regularity is something we had never experienced before Covid 19 except, perhaps briefly at funerals held for our father and our mother.

Paul’s speaks to this effort of staying meaningfully connected even at a distance, reminding us that in the spirit of God’s love we are never alone but are one in Christ and belong to God’s family. As with joy, this belonging is a gift to us from God as well, prompting us to find creative ways to stay connected, standing firm in the Lord.

# 2

Paul exhorts us to genuinely support and give thanks for the leaders of the church as they seek the best ways possible to further the work of the gospel in these especially difficult times and circumstances.

Friends in Christ, St Paul urges us to stand firm in the Lord throughout these challenging times by supporting the women and men we have designated as our leaders—Pastor Sue, others on staff, our elected leaders on church council, and those who lead the work of our ELCA local and church-wide synods. There is no better time than this current “Covid time” to express gratitude for their steadfast service and for the faithfulness of others who served before them, remembering that the ministry of our Lord over the centuries has always and will continue to be a *shared vocation*.

# 3

At a time when we may well become preoccupied by wave after wave of disturbing news on our screens, St Paul urges us to step away from our TV sets and to simply delight in the Lord, to treasure in our hearts the ways and wonders of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. I for one, feel led these days to watch less TV and by way of my devotions, classes online, and brief meditations, faith talks and caring conversations with others, I am delighting in God’s gift of a Savior who God has been given us to help us focus and refocus day by day on what is life-giving, what heals and will restore us unto better health and helpfulness to each other. Delighting in the Lord day by day we are better able to stand firm in him together.

# 4

With the stress and anxiety we are all experiencing these days, I know my behavior is sometimes adversely effected. In other words, more often than I’d like to admit, I’m downright crabby and inclined toward mean-spiritedness. Paul tells us that to stand firm in the Lord requires we do as the Lord has done and now what with the help of his spirit he requires of us today—that we show heartfelt compassion and loving kindness toward ourselves and others. Even with God’s help this is not an easy thing to do, especially toward people who deeply trouble us. Currently I’ve found the Daily Calm app (C A L M) on my phone a wonderful help in recognizing my stress, learning from it, and turning it over to the Lord. A few minutes devoted to this practice each day is helping me manage my stress better, allowing me to stand even with those with whom I disagree, trusting in a more perfect union that is ours to enjoy and from which to prosper in the Lord.

# 5

While of first importance, Paul’s fifth exhortation in the fifth verse of Philippians chapter four, is that we stand firm in the Lord by simply declaring *the Lord is near*. Ponder this for a moment. How do we greet each other in worship? The one presiding simply says, “The Lord be with you.” To which we all respond, “and also with you.” I believe Pastor Paul would suggest that we do this not only to acknowledge the living Lord in worship but to also put into practice declaring the presence of the Lord in our daily lives. Day by day we are to remind ourselves and each other of this reality—that the Lord is near and in this blessed assurance we can stand firm against all odds, against every adversary, every adversity with hope and joy.

# 6

With so much uncertainty and so much of what we have counted on now appearing to rest on sinking sand, Paul suggests we become mindful of our worries and deliberately turn what troubles us over to the Lord in prayer. This mindful practice makes room for peace within us. Paul writes in verse 6: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

It was theologian Helmut Thielicke who said, “God is always there first, and therefore our praying is always only an answer to this simple fact.” In other words, what we feel lead to pray about is stirred by the Lord within and around us. When worry prompts us to pray we can be sure God is involved and working with us to turn our worries into something good. Indeed, we stand firm in the Lord whenever we prayer because prayer is prompted by the living Lord in whom we find joy and peace.

**I’m going to save Paul’s seventh suggestion on how we stand firm in the Lord until last and quickly mention two others:**

# 8

As in the time Paul wrote to the Church of Philippi, the days we are experiencing in 2020 are full of confusion and conflicting facts. We hunger for truth that saves and find ourselves reeling in the current whirlwind of lies, deceit, disgust, disinformation, misinformation, gossip and hearsay. This is why Paul urges us to concentrate on what we know to be true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, of excellence, and worthy of praise. Such a discipline will prove life-giving and stabilizing. It would be a mistake to oversimplify the complexities we face in our world today. But it can be even more of a mistake to overcomplicate the simple facts of God’s acceptance of us and our belonging to God.

# 9

The second to the last suggestion Paul makes in Philippians 4:9 is this encouraging word: “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.”(vs 9) Together we stand firm in the Lord by doing what we have learned and received from the likes of Paul and others to include, by the way, folks at Our Saviour’s Lutheran Seaside who have over the life of the congregation, by the grace of God, faithfully lived and served Christ, their example benefiting us today. (Pause)

One More

Wow! Paul offers us a lot today. And we have one more suggestion from Paul… He tells us that we can stand firm in the Lord because the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. God’s peace in these tumultuous times provides us with an unfailing sense of place and purpose. Thanks to God’s gift of peace through faith in Jesus Christ, we know beyond understanding, where we stand and to whom we belong.

The late Gerhart Frost in his book Homing in the Presence, published in the 1980s, tells a story I’ll share for the conclusion of my message to you this morning:

*There was once a powerful man, important in the world of business. He was accustomed to command, to having his own way. One day, late for an appointment, he decided to take a shortcut. To his dismay, he soon found that he’d chosen the wrong road. He realized he was completely lost, and determined to ask the first person he saw for directions.*

*That person was a child. He addressed the young boy gruffly, “Boy, which way to Dover?”*

*“I don’t know,” the child responded, embarrassed.*

*“Well then, “ the man demanded, “how far to Paynesville?”*

*“I don’t know that either,” the child answered.*

*The man’s questions got angrier as the boy kept responding with the same answer. The boy grew more and more uncomfortable and, finally, the man lost his temper and shouted, “You don’t know much, do you?”*

*Then, for the first time, the boy smiled. Looking up the winding road to a little house where the evening light shone through the window, the boy exclaimed, “No, but I ain’t lost.”*

Friends in Christ, by the grace of God and help like Paul has given us this morning, we ain’t lost either. (Pause)

And now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And let everyone say, AMEN