

**Focus on Excellence**  
**Philippians 4:4-9**  
**March 17, 2019 – Second Sunday in Lent**

Friends, most of you know that I generally try to follow what is called the Revised Ecumenical Lectionary, that list of suggested scriptural passages for the Christian church. I like to follow the lectionary. I think there is a certain spiritual strength in Christian churches around the world all studying the same passage at the same time. I have also stated that, while I follow the lectionary, I am not a slave to the lectionary. There are those times when the lectionary just doesn't seem to fit the current situation; and today is one of those days. And so, as I prayed about today's sermon, and as I leafed through my Bible, this passage from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi jumped out at me.

“Rejoice always. . . Don't worry about anything. . . Make your requests known to God. . Focus your thoughts on that which is excellent and admirable, true, holy and just, pure and lovely.”

If, during the Lenten Season, we are seeking a closer relationship with the living Christ, I truly can't think of a better passage of scripture than this.

These are difficult times. They are difficult times for our church and they are difficult times for our country. But each of us has a choice. We can focus on the difficulties, we can focus on the negatives; or we can focus on the joys, we can focus on the positives, we can focus on the love of Christ.

When I was an IT Manager, prior to entering the ministry, I spent some time working with a member of our training department named Kay. Kay had previously studied with Edward Deming. Edward Deming is credited with launching a management movement focusing on quality from the top to the bottom. He is also credited with turning around the Japanese economy. You know, when I was a kid, “made in Japan” meant “junk”; much like “made in China” might mean today. But today, the Japanese make some of the finest technology and the finest automobiles and even the finest musical instruments in the world. Anyway, back to Kay. . . One of Kay's favorite sayings was “What we focus on expands.”

It's so true, “What we focus on expands.” How often I have met with people suffering from depression; and I ask, why are you so focused on the negative things. Focus on the positive. Focus on what is excellent and admirable, holy, pure, lovely. Focus on love.

You know, sometimes the Holy Spirit really works in wonderfully strange, mysterious ways. A few weeks back, I was needing to deal with the tragic results

for our denomination's General Conference. I was at my computer, watching the YouTube video of our bishop's address; and, as YouTube does, along the right side bar were the advertisements for other videos that they thought I might be interested in.

One of them caught my eye – an interview of Marianne Williamson by Dr. Mark Hyman. Now, to some of you, the name Mark Hyman will sound familiar. He was the “Food Guy” in the Daniel Plan. He's the physician who discusses the “Food Essential” and how healthy food plays a role in healthy living. He is also the Chair of the Functional Medicine Department of Cleveland Clinic; and I confess, I am a big fan of Mark Hyman.

So, as soon as I was finished listening to the bishop, I clicked on Dr. Hyman's interview. I listened to his guest, Marianne Williamson speak of love as the center of the universe; and how the holy is the source of all love. I listened to her speak of the importance of prayer and meditation. Then I went to my Kindle and downloaded one of her many books – “A Return to Love.” There I read how love is the energy of the universe, because God is love. I read about how we must relinquish thought systems based on fear and replace them with thought systems based on love. I read about how we need love in order to live happily, as much as we need oxygen in order to live at all. I also read that sin is loveless perception and atonement is the correction of that perception. I could go on; but instead, I'll recommend that you read the book for yourself. Let me simply say, this was exactly the book I needed to read at the exact time that I needed it.

How often have I told our youth that the most wonderful gift in all the world is the amazing love of God. Now, when I say that I will focus on the love of God, don't hear that I'm putting General Conference behind me. It is precisely because I believe that God is a loving God, that I will continue the challenge of curing what I believe to be an injustice that the United Methodist Church is doing to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. I will not simply sit back and accept the actions of our General Conference. Still, I will always recognize that the love of our amazing God surpasses any and all human actions.

I've stated before, when I was being interviewed by a committee for ordination, I was asked what I thought the most important verse in the Bible was. I stated, “Genesis 1:27 – “So God created human kind in his image, in the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them.” And a few verses later we read “And God saw all he had created, and indeed it was very good.” My ordination committee seemed surprised. I suspect they thought I would quote something from the New Testament – maybe the Great Commission or the Great Commandments or that ever-famous John 3:16. But I explained, Genesis 1:27 is the verse that gives all life its meaning.

You and I and every other person on this planet is created in the image of God. There is a spark of the divine in every person on this planet. I hope and I pray that we will all treat every person on this planet, ourselves and every other person, with the love and the respect deserving of the image of God.

But Williamson takes this one step further in her book. She echoes a concept that I first read about in a graduate theology class now twenty-five years ago. Being created in the image of God means that we were created to co-create. And if God is love, if God is the energy, the source of all love, and we were created to co-create, we were likewise created to be a source of love, a source of goodness, a source of holiness, indeed a source of energy that will drive this planet in a positive direction.

And so I turn back to the book of Philippians. I remind myself to concentrate on what is excellent, admirable, true, holy, pure, just, lovely, and worthy of praise. I remind myself as I remind you to concentrate on the amazing love of God. Folks, we have a wonderful God. We have a just God. We have a merciful God. I praise God for this church, for all that it stands for, and for all that it does in mission and in justice for the betterment of all God's people. And I praise God for the love in which God wraps all people regardless of their age, regardless of their race, regardless of their ethnicity, and regardless of their sexuality.

And as I praise God and thank God for the love that we experience in Christ, I call on our church to co-create, to share that love, that goodness, and that peace with all God's people.

And so I close with Paul's benediction to his Philippian Congregation:

"May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep you hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord," (Phil 4:7) this Lenten Season and forever more. Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor  
North Olmsted United Methodist Church