

SERMON: "JOYFUL FOR ... A LASTING PEACE"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT NUMBERS 6:22-27
NEW TESTAMENT PHILIPPIANS 4:1, 4-7

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INTRODUCTION

Pizza Ranch. I learned my lesson, at long last, at Pizza Ranch.

It is an "all you can eat" eatery. So that is what I would do. Eat all I could eat.

I did so at other restaurants, like Golden Coral (a Sunday lunch spot when our kids were younger, when we lived in a small North Carolina town)

It's an 'all you can eat' place. So that is what I did there too

Many a time I have told myself, "So what if you're full, it's all you **can** eat"

One more trip up to the buffet to get some more fried chicken. I paid for it!

I'd eat until I ached (my kids call it having a "food baby")

That was until Pizza Ranch about 6-7 years ago. That's when I finally realized I didn't need (or even want) one more plateful

I don't need more. You know what else I don't need more of? Stress. Worry.

But over the years I have often found myself feeding my stress. You ever do that?

You worry about something, something real, something legit ...

Then, next thing you know, you're finding one thing after another to worry about something that proves how right you are about whatever you think is wrong

You end up feeding your worries like you're back at Pizza Ranch

and they just came out with fresh fried chicken ... and dessert pizza

Oh, my stomach hurts just thinking about the buffet lines of stress and worry

I've visited and revisited and revisited ... and revisited

It took me quite some time to learn my lesson at Pizza Ranch

Turns out it's taken about that same amount of time (maybe more) to realize

I'd be better off if I can stop feeding my stress. It doesn't do me (or anyone else) any good. Better to find my peace than to feed my stress.

About our anxieties, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians ... and to us.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Notice how things fit together in these verses, particularly "do not be anxious about anything" being stuck in between "Rejoice in the Lord always ...

the Lord is near" then words about taking everything to God in prayer and then about the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds

PUT IN PERSPECTIVE

The reason we need not be anxious about anything, the reason we need not feed our stress like we're at an 'all you can eat' place is because the peace of God is guarding our hearts and minds. It's like having a humble teacher from Nazareth at our table, at Pizza Ranch, saying "You know, you don't need another trip to the buffet to feed that stress ... I got this, I got you."

Thinking about how the line "do not be anxious about anything" fits in these verses, I found myself voicing an old movie line, "Ok Mugsy, come out with your hands up. We've got you surrounded." Our anxieties are surrounded ... by joy, by prayer, by knowing that the Lord is near, by God's peace guarding our hearts and minds. Talk about being surrounded, being outnumbered.

Paul knew a thing or two about anxieties. He wrote these words about joy, about peace from a prison cell. He's not glossing over the anxiety, not adding sugar to mask it. I'd suggest he is talking directly to our anxieties.

I'd liken those anxieties to the person next to you at the stop light, the one who feels like the whole world needs to hear their music. It's so loud you can hear the car windows rattling – their windows and yours.

What are you to do? You can pretend you don't hear it, but you do. You can turn up your music – but NPR or Steely Dan at volume level 10. Well, it just doesn't work, does it? Same holds true with the loud voices that try to make us angry or anxious. Pretending they are not there doesn't work. Responding with our own loudness, that doesn't work either.

What works is to put things into perspective. The light will change soon enough. The anxieties are real ... but so too the power of prayer, the nearness of God, the peace of God which passes all understanding and guards our hearts and minds. Putting things into perspective, we can rejoice in the Lord. Always.

One of the questions I often ask as I read the bible (and as I read the news) is 'where is God in all this?' Paul, in his own way, answers that question as he tells us to rejoice always and as he puts things into perspective. Where is God in relationship to our anxieties?

Reading through these few verses, we are reminded that ... God is near, God is available through prayer and God is on guard, guarding our hearts and minds with the peace of God which surpasses our understanding.

Paul's logic is easy to follow. He begins with the call to rejoice in the Lord. He follows that with reasons why ... because God is near. But he doesn't go there immediately. He first tells us to let our gentleness be known to all. Let's not skip that. We can be gentle. We need not fight fire with fire, name calling with name calling, loud music with loud music.

SERENITY PRAYER

The situation, whatever it usually is, could probably use some gentleness
Makes me think about the serenity prayer as the perfect response to anxieties
and anger. The serenity prayer helps me to be gentle with myself and with others

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

This prayer has been my go-to prayer for years. I pray it every day, every night
And it is the first thing I do when I start to feel anxious. I've learned over the years
of praying this brief prayer (it is part of a longer prayer) is that all three things
go together – serenity about things I cannot change, courage about things
I can change and the wisdom to know the difference

It is not a 'do nothing' prayer, just accept things as they are.
It is a calming prayer (serenity) and an empowering prayer (courage)
and a pragmatic prayer (wisdom). No, I don't need to go back to the buffet.
Paul's words are much the same – calming, empowering, pragmatic

My joy is not some Pollyanna naivete or some kind of willful ignorance
It looks my anxieties straight in the eye, then looks around to notice
and take comfort in the God-given peace that guards my heart and mind

And that peace, that lasting peace (that is ours as a gift, not an accomplishment)
then gives me the courage and wisdom to do what I can do
Or in the case of the buffet line of my anxieties ... what not to do

Now as to what I can do ... specifically about one of my anxieties
about leading worship and going late like last week
Here are 3 or 4 out of those ten minutes I told you I owe you
So I'll end here. The peace of Christ be with you ...