

“Think About These Things” / Philippians 4:1-9 / 12 October 2014

“Think about these things,” the Apostle tells his friends at Philippi. “Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing. If there's anything worthy of praise, think about these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” You're going to dedicate your inner life to something. In the quiet of your mind, in a place no one can go, you'll have clips from old movies, and you'll have memories, and songs, and words from books, perhaps even a few lines of poetry, and the voices of long-dead loved ones, and all these things will roll continuously in your mind like ESPN on the TVs at TGI Friday's. You can pay attention or not, but there's always something playing in the background of your mind. It's surprising the things that repeat themselves in our quiet thoughts, the old injuries and joys. It's astonishing the things that have marked us so profoundly that they now make up the background to all our wakeful thinking, and perhaps our dreams as well. You're going to dedicate your inner life to something, and that thing will turn around and make you who you are, and you'll make the world what it will be. And so, what will it be?

Long ago, in an unhappy hospital room, during a very stressful time, I watched in horror as a struggling nurse tried to get my wife to render up her arm for a third attempt at an I.V. They had taken the first one out, but then thought better of it. It's true that this poor nurse was a bit of a bumbler, but I know very few people who hate needles as much as my wife, and she was refusing, being physically resistant. The nurse looked to me with pleading eyes, as I stared with great interest at my hands, or the walls, or the door. I couldn't help her. In a desperate voice, the nurse begged Michelle, “Now, listen you just need to think about your happy place. A nice beach. On an island. Hawaii!” Ah, yes, the happy place. Just think positive thoughts, and that will fix everything. The words were meant to be soothing, but there was so much desperation in the way she said them that I felt sorrier for that nurse than for Michelle. Though the attending physician herself came in to beg, it was all to no avail; there would not be another I.V. All meds would be taken orally. And in that moment, it occurred to me that if the nurse spoke longingly of a beach in Hawaii, it was because that was where she wanted to be.

This all happened at Magee Hospital a decade ago, a place where they work hard at creating a soothing atmosphere, with mauve walls and decorative prints in every room. Most hospitals add to a patient's anxiety with their sterile, cold environment, but this place was different. They try hard to be “the happy place,” despite that fact that many people only end up there under the unhappiest of circumstances. There was a trickling fountain and a nice player piano in the lobby that ran a constant loop of Lionel Richie songs. “Dancing on the Ceiling,” “Say You, Say Me,” “Endless Love.” I'm grateful to Magee Hospital, but I never want to go back there. I appreciate their efforts to create a soothing environment, but they've ruined Lionel Richie for me forever. When I'm on hold, and they start to play the old Richie song “Hello,” it trips a chord; those days return. I can go months and months without thinking of them, but then it's amazing just how little it takes to bring them back. I don't even like going to that part of town anymore. “Then don't,” the Apostle Paul whispers down the ages. “Just don't. Don't go back there. Think about the things that give you life, not the things that cause you pain. If you dwell on darkness and fear, your life will be filled with darkness and fear. But whatever is good, whatever is right, think about these things.” It's not denial. It's owning painful truths, touching them, naming them, then telling them to go outside and play because you have better things to do than to entertain them.

Oh, the places where people get themselves stuck, the moments in time that stretch on forever because we cannot stop dwelling in them, the old, old fears that should have dissipated long ago, the wounds that loved-ones dealt us, the same old stuff over and again, the

disappointments we entertain, that settle into bitterness, the words that got lodged in our ears, that we hear years and years after the voice that made them has been forever silenced. Henry VIII's right-hand man, for a time, Cardinal Wolsey, famously said of the king, "Be very, very careful what you put in that head, because you will never, ever get it out." And it's true; we cannot unsee something we have seen. We cannot unhear something we have heard. We cannot unlive something we have lived in our own lives. But we can choose which of those things to put on the loop that circulates daily through our minds. We choose which things in life we will dwell upon.

The passage we've just read from Philippians is just an excerpt from a private letter that Saint Paul wrote to his faraway friends, and it rings with all the hope and passion that only real paper letters can express. Alas, if all the saints lived today, their emails wouldn't be worth rereading, for emails can't begin to say what pen and ink once said. Emails are for convenience, not for passion; they're utilitarian and humorless. But are there words wiser and more poetic than these? "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but make your prayers to God, and the peace of God which passes understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

All the way back in the first century, Saint Paul is aware of the basic technique that today we call "cognitive behavioral therapy." In churches, back in the 1950s and 60s, it was known as "The Power of Positive Thinking." It's often derided as so much fluff by religious people today. Even Hollywood can't help but ridicule the eternal optimist. Saturday Night Live used to have a regular skit about the guy who looked at himself in the mirror and declared, "I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And doggone-it, people like me." And yet, this is not Norman Vincent Peale or Little Orphan Annie speaking. This is the grave old Apostle Paul. He's not a starry-eyed, frivolous man. He is speaking wisdom here, for we all have an inner life that the world does not see. We all have a hidden life, an interior life, that can be observed in our actions and words. We are all of us the masters of a small domain within our own spirits and minds. Things we think about, things we dwell upon, these things make us who we are, as we collectively set about the task of making the world what it is. We can wreck our lives by dwelling on all that scares us, and if enough of us wreck our own lives, then together we will wreck our world. Or we can participate in healing our lives by dwelling on things of joy, and if enough of us heal our lives, if enough of us live not for fear but for joy, then together we will heal our world.

I have a friend who always gets depressed in October. Autumn is a time to dwell upon the limits of things. A leaf has its limits, and after its one green season, it makes the world lovely in its parting, painting a common roadside meadow with deep reds, or yellows, or oranges. That beauty is its swan song, and after one bright week it falls back to the earth from which it came. A garden has its limits, and its most abundant yield comes just before it fades into chilly November browns and grays. Anthropologists claim that human beings are naturally tropical creatures, but I know many who are not. As much as we love summer, many of us can only take so much of it before we collapse gratefully into the arms of October. We, all of us, have our limits. Youth ignores them and age tries to hide them, because deep down we know that those limits are born of the fact that we are finite. We only live so long, at least in our current state. And who can bear to look upon his or her own finitude? There's a line in the movie *Little Children* where the elderly mother of a mentally ill, middle-aged man is aware that she's going to

die soon. I haven't been able to find the line anywhere on the Internet, but I recall the gist. She looks at the son she loves and worries about, the one she must finally leave to the world where he never fit in, and she says, "You're amazing. All people are amazing because they manage to keep on living even though they know that someday everything they love will be gone." We're all vaguely aware that we too march toward the great unknown, that we pass eventually from being into non-being. And so, we erect barriers to keep us sane. We buy insurance. We think about other things. Our culture tries very hard to convince us that we can live forever, and in ourselves we know that we cannot. Who can bear to look upon his or her own finitude? And yet, for all of that, for all the great lengths we go to in order to hide from our own limitations, so many of us spend our good years, our healthy years, our finest and most productive years dwelling not on the things of life, but on the things of death! The anxieties, the defeats, all the things that might go wrong, the tensions and the griefs.

Ages past have done a better job than ours at keeping people focused on life-giving things. There was a time not long ago—though none of us recalls it—there was a time not long ago when people believed that the world was just getting better and better. Many people in this room today were raised by parents who saw the world with brighter lenses than ours. Vaccines and antibiotics were being developed; soon there would be nothing we couldn't cure. Poverty was retreating; soon there would be a chicken in every pot. Life spans were getting longer, and each generation wealthier and more educated than the one before it. Farming got easier and more productive. You could drive a motorcar across the state in just two days. You could send a telegraph across the world in a matter of minutes. People had faith! Faith in their governments, faith in their churches, faith in humanity itself. Sure, they knew that death still visited each of them individually in the end, but they participated in a world where big Death—capital D—seemed to be retreating. Besides, there was a certainty about their living and their dying that most of us can no longer muster today. The grave was but a doorway to eternal life.

But then the mustard gas and the trench warfare, then the Holocaust and the gas chambers of central Europe. We began to discover the limits of human progress exactly where we found the limits of human kindness. Science itself, which was meant to save us, became a tool in the hands of cruelty. At Dresden, and in Flanders Fields, and at My Lai in Vietnam, where even our heroes showed a dark side. We could land one man on the moon, but deny basic human rights to another man here on earth. We discovered our limits, our finitude, the presence of death within us, and we—as a world—have been brooding about it ever since. We looked into the abyss of our own darkness, and it scared us as well as breaking our collective heart. Now, you'll notice that all the TV shows have tortured good guys. Superheroes like Batman and Superman now have a troubled dark side. In some ways, we're sadder-but-wiser. In other ways, we're just sadder, for death is what we believe in and see. Our jaded hearts now know the limits of human science. And now, when darkness presents itself—ISIS, the Ebola virus, renewed racism, climate change—when darkness presents itself, it is all we see. Each humanitarian crisis is an opportunity for political infighting. And if there is nothing but darkness, you might as well live for gain and the pleasures of today. We know the limits of human kindness, and of our own government, and of our now-faded religious institutions.

Yes, we finally know our limits; that's to say our finitude, the very presence of death within us. And yet, even through the most troubled times of human history, the prophets have declared it: "Love is stronger than death. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." We know our limits, but do we know the boundless life of God, which is also around us and within? Do we know that Christ's kingdom is hidden both within us and among us, and that

it is the home for which we long? Do we know that that kingdom still comes even amid our most turbulent days, our deepest sorrow, our darkest despair? Do we know that, though civilization itself is in a very bad mood, we can buck its authority, think in different categories? We can choose to dwell instead on the things of life, and by so doing, we will enrich life in ourselves and in our world. This is the true repentance. This is the true conversion: to turn our hearts and our minds not to the brokenness of humanity but to the goodness of God, present in all persons and things—even the broken, perhaps especially the broken.

Two patients showed up at the hospital complaining of the same symptoms. The first one was an optimist. She tried to maintain a handle on life despite the fact that she was suffering. She tried to keep things in perspective. A lot of people were in far greater pain than she was. Aspirin helped a little, too. She was grateful for that. The doctor examined her, asked questions, jotted her answers into the computer. Finally he asked, “And how long have you had these symptoms?” The optimist said, “Oh, only a week.” The second patient was a pessimist, nothing was ever good enough for her, and she was forever unhappy. She walked on the cloudy side of life. She could find a personal insult in a fortune cookie. She had enjoyed poor health for decades and loved nothing more than calling her adult children to describe her most recent symptoms in sickening detail. Examining her, the doctor asked, “How long have you had these symptoms?” The pessimist replied, “Well, in three weeks it will have been a month!”

You get to choose the things that you tell yourself and others. You get to choose the way you frame your own story. Unless you suffer from some serious trauma or illness, you even get to choose the thoughts that you will entertain. You get to choose the words, the memories, the little clips from your life that you will allow to shape you/ As those things set about their task of re-creating you day by day, you will continue to shape the world around you, with each and every living creature you encounter, every word you utter, every action you undertake. Don't you know that a future you will never see is being formed in you right now, that God's life is lived in you? The world is shaped by the movies you watch, the music you listen to, the rumors you hear. Oh, make it good!

“Whatsoever things are true,” as the old King James version says it, “whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things...and the God of peace shall be with you.” The god of war has been too long with us because we do not dwell on the goodness in others. The god of greed has been too long with us, but that's because we choose to dwell in his realm. The god of fear has been too long with us because we choose to dwell in his domain. These gods only have power over us if we choose to dwell with them. The God of peace stands by. The God of peace can be discovered even in the darkness. The God of peace can be discovered even in the darkness. The God of peace is available to you, as near as your thinking. What will it be? Amen.