

Focus on the Positive

Essay 17 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Paul is coming to the end of his letter to the church in Philippi. Now the endings of letters matter. Often that’s where the best stuff is. Sometimes when I get a long email or when I’m reading a long article, I first skip to the end to see what it’s really about. Philippians follows this pattern. Some of Paul’s most memorable lines ever come from Philippians chapter 4. For instance, verses 8-9. It’s just two verses, but what two verses they are!

“Finally, brothers,
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.
Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me,
or seen in me
– put into practice.
And the God of peace will be with you.”

These may be, for many of us, among our very favorite verses in all of Scripture – this call to focus on the positive. In a life where bad stuff happens and there is so much that can get us down and there is so much negativity, so much complaint, so much criticism, these verses direct us to a better, higher way. It reminds us that we get to make choices. We can focus on the negative or we can focus on the positive. And that choice matters. But as is the case with so many passages in this letter to the Philippians there is even more going on. Let’s work our way through the text.

The first thing we will notice is that Paul has gone Hellenistic on us. The Philippians would have been very comfortable with this material long before they meet Paul. Paul is here drawing on the best of the Greek-Roman heritage and he sounds like Epictetus or Seneca or one of the other great Greek or Roman moralists. So he tells his readers to take into account – it’s more than “think about it” – it’s take into account whatever is true, whatever is real, not deceptive or illusory, whatever is honest; whatever is noble, honorable, worthy of respect; whatever is right, morally just; whatever is pure, untainted, undefiled, fit for what is sacred, fit for the presence of God; whatever is lovely, great art, great music, great literature, great lives; whatever is admirable, whatever is well-spoken-of – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – take all these things in account.

Now what Paul is doing here is striking and very important. He’s already told the believers in Philippi that their citizenship is where? “In heaven” (3:20). But he does not mean by this that they are to ignore their own heritage. They are, in fact, to take into

account what is best about Greek-Roman culture. So it's regrettable that in our time many Christians take adversarial stances against culture.

I spent a year once as graduate student in one of finest university towns in America, Ann Arbor, Michigan. I attended a church in full-scale retreat from education – scared stiff of the university. I'd walk into church from a day on campus, and it was like walking into a time warp, another century, another culture! I hung in there with them because they were good, decent, frightened people. Also because I was just married and could ignore pretty much anything else! But it was sad.

Paul saw things very differently. You remember what he did when he came to Athens, still in his day the greatest university town in the Roman empire (all this recorded in Acts 17): how he commended them on their religiosity, how he took off from an altar he saw with the inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD," and how he was able to quote to the Athenians their own poets, even using a poem to Zeus to point to the one God.

So Paul teaches: Embrace what is good in your own culture. And that's always true whether that culture is Latin American, or Chinese, or Indian, or African, or Arabic. There is marvelous wisdom to be learned everywhere, great classics to read, great works of art to inspire us, great music, deep insight, profound, caring and loving people.

There is so much about the United States to embrace and celebrate: its inspiring stories of origins, the writings of our Founders, a system of government made stable by checks and balances, the great speeches that mark our history from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream," the economic vigor of our nation, its freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights, the price it's paid to protect freedom here and around the world, its humanitarian impulses, its world-class university and research-and-development capacities, and on and on. So we have much in our heritage that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable.

So that's verse 8. Now comes verse 9.

Paul is saying, yes, embrace what is best in your heritage. But do this in a thoughtful, discerning way, in a way that is true to being Christian. And he draws on his own model, always meaning as he says elsewhere (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:1), "Follow me as I follow Christ." It was standard to model behavior in the classical world. It was to Paul's credit that he could do this – that he could live up to this. But, in effect, he's saying in the context of the Philippian letter: Yes, take into account all that is best in your culture but weigh all this by the gospel, by the one who being in very nature God emptied himself, took the very nature of a servant, humbled himself, became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

So he says: Celebrate what's best in your heritage but hold up its ideas, its defining stories, to the light of the gospel. Hold up its politics, its economics, its militarism to the light of the gospel. Hold up its literature, its music, its art, its movies, its notions of heroism, its notions of success to the light of the gospel, this story of the one who

emptied himself, made himself nothing, took the very nature of a servant and who is now exalted by God to the highest place.

There is so much that is true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable. There is so much all around us that is excellent and praiseworthy. There is so much good to celebrate. There is so much that is positive to focus on. And all of this brings us joy. Paul doubts, however, that we will ever fully know what is true and noble and right and pure and lovely and praiseworthy unless we follow in the way of the one who emptied himself and took the very nature of a servant, unless we share in his sufferings, unless we become like him in his death. And then – surprise of all surprises – whole deeper layers of joy become ours, a joy that can never be taken from us.

– Dale Pauls