

SERMON TITLE: "Guarding Our Hearts & Minds"

SERMON TEXT: Philippians 4:2-14

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: August 18, 2019, at First UMC (Blessing Backpacks & Children's Sacred Dance Day)

INTRODUCTION

If your school hasn't started yet, it soon will. And that means that any of us who are out driving in the mornings and afternoons will see those crosswalk signals flashing and crossing guards with their little stop signs at the ready to help escort kids across the streets to safety on the other side. With all the school-aged children there are here, the Ogden area does a great job of managing the school traffic flow and keeping everyone physically safe.

If only it were so easy to keep everyone emotionally and spiritually safe. If only we could have effective crossing guards that would prevent emotional accidents from happening with bullying on the playground, in the hallways, and through social media. If only we had better spiritual safeguards against exposure to violence and disrespect in video games, television, and movies. If only we could keep our kids safe from the pressures of premature sexuality and addictive drugs.

Of course, we can't protect our children from everything. No matter how much we try to envelop them in bubble wrap, something from the outside will find its way through. Still—whether we're parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or concerned members of the church family—it does seem like a worthy cause to shield our kids from unnecessary trouble. So, today, as we're sending our kids back to school, and we're praying for their safety and well-being, I want to direct our attention to Philippians 4:7 and the verses around it. There, not only for our kids, but also for us adults, we can see some important tips about guarding our hearts and minds.

1—REJOICE IN PRAYER

The first tip for guarding our hearts and minds—and one that we can teach our kids—is to rejoice in prayer. Philippians 4:4 makes this very clear: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice."

Verses five and six spell this out more. We are able to rejoice because we have a positive confidence that “the Lord is near.” Thus, we don’t have to worry about anything, because we can take all our troubles to God in prayer. When we know that God is with us, and will handle whatever is bothering us, problems just aren’t nearly so bad. In verses 11-13, we see Paul’s wisdom that even when we are faced with adversities of various kinds, in all things, God’s help gives us confidence and strength.

Have you ever noticed how almost every problem imaginable is worse when we hold it inside and keep it to ourselves? Our minds go wild with worry and immediately rush to the worst possible scenarios. Then we lose hope and sink in depression because we can’t figure a way out. Or maybe we feel guilty or angry at ourselves and then take out that guilt and anger on other people, and they don’t even know why we’re treating them so badly. Maybe that’s why the Apostle Paul wrote the words in verse five: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” When we get snippy, withdrawn, or cruel with someone, maybe it’s because we have worries on our minds that we’ve been trying to work out all by ourselves—when what we really need to do is take our problems to God in prayer.

In prayer, we’re able to rejoice because we no longer own the problem all by ourselves. We’re able to transfer the anxiety and let God lift that from our shoulders. In that sacred communion with the Divine, worry can often give way to hope. This peace that passes understanding is what allows us to rejoice in prayer. And that rejoicing in prayer is key to guarding our hearts and minds and those of our children.

2—FOCUS ON WHAT IS GOOD

When it comes to guarding our hearts and minds, a second and related tip we find is Paul’s advice to focus on what is good. When we’re trying to protect ourselves and our kids, we need not only think of the terrible things we’re trying to prevent, but also the good we hope to achieve. It’s like vaccinations. We don’t get them just so we can think about sickness or the pain and inconvenience of

the shot, but so we can have health. It's our positive focus on well-being that is our best motivator and guard for our hearts and minds.

A dozen or so years ago, when I was appointed to Wesley United Methodist in Pueblo, Colorado, one of the church's families had their kids enrolled in a private and fundamentalist Christian school. The mother called me one day with a concern. She said that her daughter's teacher had assigned the students to memorize a certain Bible verse. I don't remember the exact verse, but it was something about being cursed for sinning. The mother didn't want her daughter to be so focused on the negative. So the mom had gotten permission from the teacher to have her daughter memorize a different, more positive verse, and the mom was then asking me, her pastor, for a suggestion. The first verse that came to my mind was Philippians 4:8—"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 and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

A number of years ago—as a result of some important research—leaders of schools, churches, and community programs started talking a lot about "40 Developmental Assets" that would help guard the hearts and minds of our children and youth. Those 40 positive assets included things like family support, community service, responsible adult role models, involvement in wholesome youth activities, motivation for learning, honesty, friendship skills, and positive self-esteem. All those assets can help a child develop in a very strong way. In fact, they are the resources and skills that would help any of us to succeed in life. Guarding our hearts and minds and those of our children definitely includes focusing on what is good.

3—DO IT IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

So, guarding our hearts and minds begins with rejoicing in prayer and focusing on what is good. But the Apostle Paul isn't done yet with his advice to the Philippians on this topic. In this text, we see

that guarding our hearts and minds and those of our children also involves a third factor: We should do it in a community of faith.

Even as Paul is sharing this wisdom, he admits that it isn't always easy. Guarding our hearts and minds in community can be complicated and messy. Take Euodia and Syntyche for example. The implication in verse two is that those women weren't exactly getting along. Apparently they had a difference of opinion, and that's why Paul was urging them to "be of the same mind in the Lord." Any of us who have been active in any church know that where two or three are gathered in God's name, there's the potential for conflict. The *peace* that passes understanding can sometimes pass us right by.

But that potential for conflict and complication isn't a reason not to embrace a community of faith. Even as Paul was urging Euodia and Syntyche to get along, he was also pointing out their great value in the Philippian ministry. Dedicated servants both, they had been right there doing the work of the gospel beside Paul, Clement, and the others. Each person added gifts and graces to the church that made it stronger for them all.

The fact that guarding our hearts and minds is best done in and with a community of faith is also seen in verses 10 and 14. There we see Paul rejoicing in the kind concern the Philippian Christians had shown him. When he wrote this letter, Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel. The conditions in his cell were probably pretty crude. With the Lord giving him strength, Paul gained a lot of courage and could bear considerable hardship. But it was a huge blessing and encouragement that Paul *also* had a congregation of fellow believers who were praying for him, visiting him, and sending help for his physical needs.

Knowing that it takes all of us together to make a community of faith, Paul did his part too. From his jail cell, the apostle and missionary wrote this amazingly upbeat letter to the Philippians, so that they too could be encouraged, blessed, and uplifted. On top of that, it's amazing to think what a positive gift this letter has been to Christians around the globe for 2000 years.

When we're alone, locked up in our own private world of troubles, things can begin to look pretty bleak. But, when we know we have a community of faith surrounding us in prayer and offering practical assistance, it's a lot less likely that we will turn to despair and hopelessness. When our children and youth have a community of faith surrounding them with love, it's a lot less likely they will turn to self-destruction or hatefulness. Let's give our kids and ourselves this important tool. Guarding our hearts and our minds is best done in a community of faith.

CONCLUSION

There's a contemporary Christian songwriter and singer whose name is Steve Green. In 1989, he recorded a song called "Guard Your Heart." I found it on YouTube where there are video pictures that accompany his singing. The combination of the pictures and the lyrics makes it clear that the songwriter wanted to warn Christians to be careful to guard their hearts from things like pornography, adultery, and putting money before faith. He advises, "The human heart is easily swayed, and often betrayed at the hand of emotion. You dare not leave the outcome to chance. You must choose in advance" to "guard your heart, guard your heart."

We older ones certainly do need to guard our hearts and minds so that we can help our children and youth to do the same. Paul's how-to-instructions to the Philippians are helpful: Rejoice in prayer, focus on what is good, and do it in a community of faith. Those are great keys to guarding our hearts and minds.