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Our Scripture today begins, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown stand firm in the Lord. Beloved, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord.”

Did you catch it?

It’s easy to miss, just one sentence about two people with rather complicated Greek names, who had an argument 2000 years ago.

Well, I should say, two *women* had an argument. Two women who had, as Paul writes, “struggled with me, Paul, in the **ministry** of the Gospel ... as coworkers, as co-laborers in the **ministry** of the Gospel.”

This notion – that two *women* – two *women!* were named ministers of the Gospel was so shocking, so unbelievable to medieval biblical scholars, that for generations many insisted that Paul had written a first-century typo, and Euodia was not a woman but a man!

And despite the misgendering of Euodia for centuries, the simple fact of the matter is the church in Philippi was brought to birth in partnership with another woman: Saint Lydia. The book of Acts tells us that Lydia was a wealthy merchant. She, like Euodia and Syntyche, is not mentioned in relation to any man – husband or father. She was “enabled by the Lord to embrace Paul’s message,” and immediately following her conversion she invited Paul to stay with her. In fact, after Paul was freed from prison the first time, he “left the prison and made his way to Lydia’s house where he ... encouraged the brothers and sisters.”<sup>1</sup>

When Paul was freed from prison he returned to Lydia’s *home* to preach, and it is in HER HOME that *is* the church, her home is their sanctuary! And in this women’s home-made-church, Euodia and Syntyche are important enough to the community that Paul calls them by name.

Why does this matter?

Because **the way we tell our history matters**. I don’t mean to paint rosy portrait of the early church, or to excuse Paul’s other writings on women that, well, would have a preacher like myself be silent in church. But if we gloss over these women, we erase the history that women were preachers and teachers and movement-makers *right from the start*.

So what is the explicit *reason* Paul mentions Euodia and Syntyche? He wrote, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord.”

Whatever the role these women had in this church, what we primarily know is that they had an argument, and that their argument was intense enough that word of it has reached Paul who – once again – is in prison, this time far from Philippi.

Even in the church that was Paul’s “joy and crown,” even in this brave and beautiful woman-led church, there was division.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 4:40

Division between friends and families, coworkers and strangers – this is not new to us. We are living in an age of heightened anxiety and division, where our communities and country are not only politically divided between conservative and liberal, but when we who consider ourselves to be more progressive have serious in-fighting. Maybe this was the kind argument Euodia and Syntyche were having. We are compelled to do the painful reckoning with racism, with homophobia, with sexism, with ableism. Some of us are clamoring for our rights until our voices are sore. Some of us are trying to learn how to listen, how to lean in when the conversation is tough. Some of us are doing both.

And that tension isn't all that produces anxiety. There is a seeming litany of hurricanes and fires plundering life and limb. There are more and more reports of powerful men sexually assaulting women seemingly without consequence. There's the legislation that is threatening away healthcare for millions, forcibly deport the Dreamers, and strip away the inch of protection from discrimination LGBTQIA+ people have.

And there are the still-fresh memories of that horrific night in Las Vegas.

It is a grim world to behold.

But the reality is, it has always been a grim world to behold.

The world has never been accommodating to people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, people who live on the margins. So many of my friends of color speak more of their exhaustion than their horror, though the horror is certainly there.

In my work as a research assistant, I transcribed sermons preached by women in Duke Chapel over the last fifty-or-so years. As I sat transcribing a sermon on a day of particularly bad news, I listened to a woman preach about the hold fear had over the nation, how sibling seemed to be turning against sibling, how the world did not feel safe. She was preaching in 1978, but it could have been said today.

So I did some more digging. Sermons from the 1960s, and the 1970s, and the 1980s, and the 1990s, and the 2000s – sermons preached by white women, black women, brown women – university chaplains and distinguished theology professors – all of them had this running theme: *the world does not feel safe*.

I do not share this to diminish the present pain you are facing, or hurting people everywhere are facing. Nor do I mean to say that the reasons we argue with one another like Euodia and Syntyche can be “reduced” to generalities.

**Pain is always particular. And we should never diminish the power of pain in our selves or each other simply because pain is common or repetitive.**

**The world has always been insecure.** And we have always been called to seek God's peace, not our security.

There are times when it is easier to believe the lie that the world is safe. But the prophet Isaiah reminds us that we worship a God “who makes ruthless nations afraid” and who is a refuge to the poor and the needy.<sup>2</sup>

And yet even when we have faith in God, living in such an insecure world still causes profound anxiety. Anxiety that is incredibly legitimate – because desiring safety for ourselves to flourish, for children to be free, for love to be nurtured is a good and Godly thing to want.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 25: 1 – 9

Anxiety is powerful, and real, and so often beyond our control, because this world makes no promises to us that it can keep.

So this is what Paul says to do with our anxiety: “do not be anxious about anything; instead, bring your fear to God, and give thanks. Then the *peace* of the God that exceeds *all understanding* will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.”

Will keep your hearts, and your minds, safe. Safe in Christ Jesus.

In a world where there is no safety, what does it mean to seek safety in God?

Notice, Paul does not say, “God will keep you from bodily harm,” nor does he say “God’s peace will give us national security and a safety from the threats that seek to dehumanize and harm us,” nor does he say “and this is really easy to do.”

God’s peace is beyond all understanding, because God’s peace is not about our security. This is a radical call to let go of our fear – real, painful, deep fear. It is a call to be dispossessed of all that we think gives us power over ourselves, and over others.<sup>3</sup>

So how do we let go of our fear? How do we seek this peace? “From now on, if anything is excellent, and if anything is admirable – focus your thoughts on *these* things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.”

This is not a concrete plan to reassure us that things will work out, nor is it an easy template for conflict resolution. It’s quite the opposite: in a world that is not holy or lovely or pure, choose to see the life that is thriving in spite of this present darkness. The Lord is near.

This doesn’t mean that we are supposed to just be happy and blind to suffering; remember, Paul, a brown Jewish man imprisoned by the state for speaking against injustice. Lydia risked her wealth and her status and her privacy to open up her home to the church in Philippi. Euodia and Syntyche trusted their community enough to love them even though they were angry.

Knowing our hearts and minds are held safe by God might lead incredibly dangerous places.

But if there was no joy to be sought, nothing lovely or pure or good or holy to be seen – then there is no point in having any faith at all.

So, yes: Seeking God’s love, seeking God’s joy, can never be separated from seeking God’s justice. So as we see all that is true, we learn to recognize the lies worldly power and security allure us with. As we see all that is holy, we see dehumanizing words and actions as fundamentally unholy. As we see all that is just, we remember those who are hungry for justice.

**But also we are told: seek all that is lovely, seek all that is pure, seek all that is worthy of praise.** Living with anxiety is exhausting, and brutal, and if we do not give

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983), p. 86 – 87 “To be followers of Jesus means that we must become dispossessed of all that we think gives us power over our own lives and the lives of others ... [for] our possessions are the source of our violence. Fearing that others desire what we have, or when we are stung by the seldom acknowledged sense that we have we do not deserve, we seek self-deceptive justifications that mire us in patterns of injustice which can be sustained only by coercion.”

ourselves reprieve, if we do not seek peace – genuine peace – we are not giving God space to remind us that God is still at work in this frightening world.<sup>4</sup>

For God will keep your hearts and minds *safe*.

Safety, real safety, is an emptying. Safety is an emptying.

I don't mean emptying like an erasure. A blind belief that all we do is wait for God to fix it. Nor do I mean that we are to seek safety by erasing the parts of ourselves that make us too much for the world. "Silence is no safety."<sup>5</sup>

Being safe in God is not lying to ourselves. Safety is telling the truth because we are not afraid of the cost.

Being safe in God is not trying to control who is worthy of love. Safety is trusting that God's love is not possessive; God's love is expansive. It only makes room for more love.

Safety in God feels like letting go of everything we are holding – everything that is in fact holding us down.

Being safe in God is letting go. Letting go and "letting the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" who chose to be dis-possessed of all of his power, of all of his might, and faced the death of a criminal.

Being safe in God is knowing even in the darkest valleys *we shall fear no evil* because God is with us.

Safety in God is putting down all the bags we carry, the alarms we set, the to-do lists we write, the walls we build – because we know we don't have to carry them anymore.

Being safe in God feels like having open hands. Emptying ourselves looks like opening ourselves up to trust – even when trust seems improbable.

Safety is knowing that the world is not safe, but choosing to live and love and seek God, anyway.

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<sup>4</sup> After all, Emma Goldman once said: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution"

<sup>5</sup> William Stringfellow