

**Series: Finding Peace in the Purple**  
**Sermon: Our Public Witness**  
**Scripture: Philippians 4:2-9**

**October 6, 2024**  
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***2** I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. **4** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **5** Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. **6** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7** And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **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. **9** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

We are all still stunned by the devastation in our beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina, and it felt good to see how rapidly people jumped in to help their neighbors. There are so many stories to celebrate that shared love today. But did you notice how quickly some moved from goodwill to the ugly name-calling and spreading of lies that tried to divide us again?

Some of the lies have been whoppers and both Republican and Democratic officials have begged people to stop the harmful rumors that keep getting shared on social media platforms, knowing that once something “goes viral” it will be taken for truth, even if it isn’t. Some have tried to politicize the Hurricane, insisting that Democrats can now control the weather, and they sent Hurricane Helene to predominately Republican areas in order to influence the election. Another favored rumor is that there is a secret discovery of Lithium in Spruce Pine and someone else has learned to control the weather and cast a line of destruction covering five states just so they can achieve a land-grab and get rich off that lithium.

Some lies have attempted to discredit organizations that are trying to help, creating distrust and potentially prolonging suffering. Setting straight a few of those rumors:  
No, FEMA is not out of money...

No, they aren’t out of money because they gave it all to migrants.

We know that because, FEMA is not out of money

No, FEMA is not refusing to allow help to enter the areas affected – it is local officials and National Guard tasked with who is allowed in and who isn’t.

No, FEMA is not confiscating donations – again, why would they?

No, neither Governor Cooper nor President Biden refused to declare a disaster, hindering vital rescue efforts in the immediate hours after the floods hit. Those declarations were made almost immediately.

I saw all these rumors being shared like crazy and all I could think was how glad I was that my parents and family in the hardest hit areas didn't have internet and couldn't see the lies that would have created more stress and heartbreak than they needed at that moment. Rumors are harmful

You might remember that Jesus endured a few rumors in his day: he was not serving God but was serving Beelzebub...he was not a prophet, he was simply crazy and his mother should just take him back home...he was planning to overthrow the emperor of Rome...and on and on it went...rumors that stirred distrust, misunderstanding...rumors that, no doubt, contributed to people turning against him. Rumors are harmful.

Most of those rumors I saw on social media could be corrected with one simple google search but apparently it is just easier to hit the "share" button than the "search" button. We should fix that.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to rumors and conflict, hatred and strife. Yet, he knew that isn't what God wants for us...it isn't what the church should want for the world. Joy in God, gentleness in action...that is what it means for God to be near. Conversations with God: prayer, gratitude, shared sorrow...are what bring peace within us...but look what Paul says about peace in the community...

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**9** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

You see what made #1 on that list: Truth

In the past few months, we have heard candidates say their lies were "misspoken memories," or that lies were acceptable as long as they brought awareness to a political issue. We've had to add "fact checking" into our political debates to try to control lying, and yet it still doesn't seem to matter. "If we say it loud enough and often enough it must be true." Seems to be the mentality, but that is not how truth works.

Truth honors

Truth seeks justice

Truth keeps corruption down

The peace that is afforded us through truth, honor, justice, and purity is pleasing and commendable. It is in peace that we find excellence and a life worthy of praise.

But if we can't be truthful...if we can't be honorable with our words and our reputation...if we can't be just in our conversations and actions...if we can't refrain from sin and we insist on doing things that are unpleasant...we are not living the faith Christ has called us to live.

Psalms 19 ends, "May these words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord" Can you imagine if we prayed that every morning before we got out of bed and encountered another person? How might our words change if we used them in order to please God? What might change about the stories we share, or the information we pass on, if we stop to ask ourselves, would this be pleasing to God?

Here is what I want us to consider – our public witness matters! We are called to be Christ-like in the world. When people watch us, when people listen to us, when people see what we share on our social media accounts...they are seeing a reflection of the Christ we say we believe in. If our words are lies, if our behaviors dishonor others, if our actions are unjust, if we are corrupt, unpleasant, disparaging, how are we showing Christ to the world? We are not. We are showing our true character and insisting that Jesus is like us, instead.

Folks, as Christians, we must take our public witness seriously. If we misrepresent Christ to the world, we have done a great wrong that will be a stumbling block to others, like Jesus warned us in last week's scripture. If we can't teach the world the truth about the Prince of Peace, how will we ever have peace? Then again, some people have found chaos more profitable, and they don't want us to find peace. Yet it is Jesus who offers us peace and knows it is something worthy of striving for.

So, maybe let's start finding peace in the purple by learning to reflect Christ to the world.

Let's start with Jesus saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Let's start by honoring truth. When you hear something that upsets you or stirs anger...don't share it, research it!

Find out what is true.

Honor that truth, even if it falls in line with an opposing view

Use that truth to work for justice

Isn't that what Jesus did? "You have heard it said, but I say to you"...Jesus was always pointing people to truth...always honoring God in doing so...always working for justice by stripping away prejudices and stereotypes created by lies and misleading information.

Earlier this week a photo was shared on social media...a little girl sitting in a boat, holding a puppy while she cried. People were moved. People were demanding the photographer receive Pulitzer. Until the truth finally came out – the photo was a fake – it was created by AI – an image generated but not authentic.

I worry this is what we are doing to Jesus – our behaviors, our willingness to accept lies and rumors and dishonor and injustice and declare it okay in the name of Jesus – are generating an image of Jesus that is not authentic – our public witness becomes a lie and that lie gets shared and goes viral and we end up with a faith that looks more like the sin of Christian nationalism than it does the Christ who loves and who saves.

Which image of Jesus are you projecting? Can you see how, if we are striving to project the authentic image of Jesus, we can find peace in the purple? How, if we honor truth and justice, we can come together to find common sense solutions to the things that worry us and the policies that divide us? Can we find peace? Let's join in a prayer of confession and try...

#### PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Holy and merciful God,**

**We have let our words inflict wounds, our actions align with injustice, and our hearts be corrupted by hatred and judgement. We have failed to be witnesses to your healing, justice seeking, loving heart in the world. We are filled with sorrow for distorting your image in the world and making you unrecognizable to people who seek a better way of living and of being. Forgive us for missing the mark, and help us to live as Psalm 100 people, sharing your goodness, love and faithfulness with the world. May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.**