

“WHATEVER...”  
PHILIPPIANS 4: 1-9

October 12, 2008  
University Church of Chicago  
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My wonderful Irish-Catholic son-in-law, Jim Cranley, gave me a Christmas present several years ago. It was a “worry stone,” a piece of Connemara from Kylemore Abbey, Ireland. He knows how much I worry, so when I thanked him, he said (with a rubbing motion of his index finger and his thumb), “You will probably wear it out before next Christmas!”

I love the inscription on the packet in which the “worry stone” was enclosed:

*Why Worry?*

*There are only two things to worry about:  
either you are well or you are sick.  
If you are well,  
Then there is nothing to worry about:  
but if you are sick, there are two things for you to worry about:  
either you get well or you will die.  
If you get well,  
then there is nothing to worry about.  
If you die:  
then there are two things to worry about:  
either you go up or down.  
If you go up, then there is nothing to worry about.  
But if you go down  
you will be so busy shaking hands with old friends,  
you won't have time to worry.*

Oh, my goodness, do you and I have a lot to worry about these days! We are living through an economic crisis unequalled in the lifetime of most of us. The stock market reaches new lows every day; more and more people have lost their homes and more are losing their jobs; once venerable institutions like Lehman Brothers have collapsed; and King Henry Paulson seems to have no idea how to get us out of this mess, which the formerly iconic Alan Greenspan fostered and defended. To top that we will go to the polls in twenty-four days, and we are confronted with the possibility not only that a very capable man of African-American origins may become our president but also that a woman who conceives of herself as a new incarnation of the biblical Queen Esther who will lead us through these Last Times which will culminate in Alaska will be a heart-beat away from the presidency of a man who is seventy-two years old and not the smartest candidate we have ever had.

There is, I'm convinced, a difference between worry and preparation. They taught me in Troop 123 of the Boy Scouts of America in Vicksburg, Mississippi, "Be Prepared," and my Professor of Church Administration at St. Paul School of Theology, Dr. Sterling Ward, taught me to live by two maxims: "Time spent in planning is never wasted" and "Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance."

In considering the issue of worry over against today's Epistle Lesson from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, I have been remembering a chapter from my misspent youth in the aforementioned Vicksburg, Mississippi, the Gibraltar of the South.

When I was a sophomore in high school (the second time I was a sophomore—after returning to Vicksburg, having run away and joined the U.S. Army), I worked in an establishment called Jones Smoke House. It stood at the corner of a very busy intersection in the days before interstate, four-lane highways, the corner of Clay and Washington Streets in the center of Vicksburg. Those streets also served as the junction of U.S. highway 61, which ran from Minneapolis to New Orleans and U.S. 80, which today is Interstate 20, running from Los Angeles to Savannah.

A Smoke House, as far as I know, was unique to the American South, and in Southern parlance served not only as a restaurant, a pool hall and a gambling establishment but also as a somewhat disreputable place where men could gather and talk about the two most important things in Southern life: politics and religion. Jones was managed by a short, impeccably-dressed, gruff little Syrian man named Eddie Monsour; he became my mentor about women, money and life's best values. The bartender, pool maven and resident wise man was a huge bear of a man named Mooney Fletcher—although nobody ever called him anything but Mooney. It was his job to keep order in the back part of the building, where fierce, competitive, high-stakes games of hearts and dominos were played and where snooker and eight-ball were practiced on some of the finest pool tables in the world.

I was in charge of the score board which stood high on the wall by the front, plate-glass window facing onto Clay Street so that passersby could keep up with football and baseball scores and, most of all, racing results. We had the most modern tickertape of the day and my job was to take the results from the tape and post them before immediately on the huge, two-story scoreboard. I spent afternoons and evenings on a precarious little runway, writing in chalk as the scores and races changed all around the country.

Hundreds of dollars, sometimes thousands rode on the accuracy of my posting inning-by-inning, quarter-by-quarter or the results of Pimlico, Churchill Downs, Santa Anita and many other thoroughbred tracks. Men screamed, wept, laughed and wondered about their sanity as they watched my work.

I had one other job that emanated from Jones Smoke House, and it was the source of greatest despair for my poor mother, the daughter of a retired Methodist preacher. When I got the job at Jones, I had given up going to Sunday evening worship services at Crawford Street Methodist Church. Now I not only worked on Sunday afternoons and

evenings, I also had the dubious job because of my age and what was perceived as my innocence by the gamblers who frequented Jones of taking a bribe, a payoff, a quid pro quo, every Sunday night to the local Chief of Police.

The Chief was a short, fat Irishman with white hair and a florid complexion. He waited in his office for me every Sunday night. Mr. Monsour would give me a sealed envelope which contained five one-hundred dollar bills. I would walk up the hill to the police station which was situated across the street from First Baptist Church and two blocks east of Crawford Street Methodist Church. I would walk straight into the Chief's office and make some small talk about the weather, the river, what I perceived was happening in the red light district on Water Street, just one block toward the river from Clay Street. Then I would dutifully hand him the envelope, he would thank me and I would go back to the Smoke House.

I soon discovered that Jones was a misnomer. Because the place generated a huge amount of money each week, it became apparent to me early on that it was not, shall we say, "locally owned." The Outfit, the Mafia, run by the Parelli family out of New Orleans, owned the establishment; they also controlled the gambling that took place on the river boats on the Louisiana side. Gambling and drinking, you see, were illegal in Mississippi in those days, but the law was universally ignored. As Will Rogers used to say, "Mississippi and Oklahoma will vote dry as long as their citizens can stagger to the polls."

One of the habitués of the Smoke House was a pitiable little man who was a victim of both gambling and alcohol. He became my devoted friend and I found myself taking care of him under some very difficult circumstances. Benny was now at the bottom of the food chain in Vicksburg's demi-monde society. He had once been very successful, but now the practiced eye could see the frayed collars and cuffs, the stains on the once-dapper, once-immaculate suit and the run-down heels of the expensive shoes he could no longer afford to buy.

In one of the most humiliating moments of my life, Mr. Monsour made me ask Benny to leave Jones Smoke House on a cold January night when I was seventeen years old. Benny had no money, and he had too much pride to beg, so he had tried to kate a check for a hamburger and fries and a cup of coffee. Mr. Monsour allowed nothing of that sort in his Smoke House and since it was late on a Sunday night with just the manager, the cook and I on duty, I was instructed, ordered to escort Benny to the door.

He was pitiable as he whispered in my ear, "One of these days, Rip, you will know worry and fear. One of these days you will have to face failure. Don't become anybody's tool, lest you become everybody's fool."

That old man—I realize now that he was very likely younger than I am now—had struggled all his life with demons that he couldn't name, much less control. He knew about light but he lived in darkness. And he wanted out but didn't know the way—or chose not to follow it.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul begins with realism, diagnosing the situation. He urges the Philippians to “stand firm in the Lord.” Remember that he’s writing to them from prison. Then he moves to hope, the faith that God is at work, that divine purposes are being worked out. One persistent threat to faithfulness is disunity, and the church must always be concerned about one another’s interests. Then he does what prophets and preachers major in, he exhorts them to have a profound confidence in God’s providence.

“God is near,” he writes. “And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7)

Even as he is in prison, even as his own life is threatened, even as he contemplates the very real possibility that he will never see his friends in Philippi again, he exhorts them to joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.”

Unlike so many Christians who are like the proverbial New Englander who fears that “someone, somewhere might be having a good time,” for Paul joy comes as an entirely appropriate response to the good news of God’s action in and through Jesus Christ.

So, after he puts the situation into realistic perspective, Paul offers hope.

“Do not expect more light until you follow what you have,” says a Quaker proverb. My problem, and I suspect it’s not mine alone, is that I ignore the light God has given me. I know all too well what I should and should not do, and generally I’m not confronted with choices between good and bad. I’m more likely to find myself having to choose between the good and the better. God has given me plenty of light, but I often prefer darkness.

A number of years ago a film called *Crazy People* delivered a funny thesis: it shows inmates of a mental hospital who, through a strange turn of events, are given high-paying jobs in the advertising business because, being crazy, they know no better than to write ad copy that tells the truth. One of their advertisements reads, “We know you love him, but if he dies, wouldn’t you like to have \$100,000 and a Mercedes-Benz? John Hancock Life Insurance.”

We have been lied to, the truth has been “spun,” we see ads every day that we do not believe. And in this era of postmodernism we are told that truth is always relative. But we are called to follow the One who says, I am the Truth.

Carlyle Marney, that great prophet from Charlotte, North Carolina, once said that there are three kinds of popular American religion that ought to die: the merely moral, the merely spiritual and the merely emotional. We need a religion that brings all three into focus in our lives. Religion is not just about do’s and don’ts, about what we ought to do. Neither is it just about spirituality and taking care of my needs nor is it about how good I feel or how my emotions respond to the sermon or the liturgy.

True religion is not about the “merely.” It’s about the possible, the hopeful, and the light that shines on our way, the light that no darkness has ever been able to put out.