

Holy and magnificent God. You speak words of life and hope, when we need to hear them most. We pray that yours be the loudest voice we hear this day and always. Amen.

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...

These words from Paul have been a balm to my soul all week long. I have read them every single day since Sunday. Sometimes silently. Sometimes out loud. Each encounter invites me to re-evaluate where my thoughts are, where my head is. And without fail, I have been grateful every single time for the invitation to bring my thoughts back to holiness, to excellence, to truth.

Wherever your mind is right now I invite you to pause and consider Paul's invitation as being for you. This day, this moment, take a second to turn your attention to that which is pleasing, to that which is worthy of praise.

Some of you may have found that easy, others may have found it difficult. Some of you may have even found it offensive considering all that is going on around us: talk of civil war. White supremacist kidnapping plots. More and more parents wondering how they're going to feed their kids. From the mundane to monumental – it all feels hard and love feels far.

Yes beloveds – I feel it too... which is why Paul's words have landed with soul shaking profundity. These hopeful, joy filled words are coming to us from inside a prison cell. Paul was imprisoned three times, twice under a death sentence – so it is likely that these words come to us today from a

man anticipating his own execution for the principal offense of preaching the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Injustice abounds. Freedom is gone. Real threats are right outside the door. Even still the instructions are this:

whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things...

Today I'm here to say that if you ever wanted/ needed permission to reorient your thinking – friends here it is.

In these past couple of weeks, I like so many of you have found myself transfixed by the social, political, cultural car crash that has become public life in America – and I myself have been desperate to move on, but unable to look away. Morbidly obsessing over the dangers that lurk just on the other side of every bad decision made by leaders and followers alike.

Is it me or is it just easier to dwell in the land of negative thinking. Turns out it's not just me. A few months ago, I and a dozen other St. Columban's partook in a book group about relationships. In the beginning of the lockdown the news was reporting that the pandemic was wreaking havoc on committed partnerships; in a show of resistance we read *We Do: Saying Yes to a Relationship of Depth, True Connection, and Enduring Love* by Stan Tatkin. In this book Tatkin explains that humans have a negativity bias, which spoiler alert is not great for relationships. But that's not the point I'm making here.

Our negativity bias is really helpful on an evolutionary level. Remembering and holding onto unpleasant experiences helped keep human beings alive. You'd remember that that berry was the one that gave you terrible indigestion, or that fire burns skin. But this negativity bias that once saved our lives, is now consuming our lives - making it harder for us to breathe. Harder for us to see the entire picture, which is that as bad as things are, as bad as things may get – darkness, devastation, depravity do not/ will not have the final word. This is what Paul knows. This is what Paul is getting at.

So much that we see is terrible – but terrible is no match for God. Spiraling, dwelling in the negative obscures our view. Our God becomes small. The God who raised Jesus from the dead. The God who Paul endured torture, imprisonment and eventually death for. The God who stirs our souls even now... that God is not small. She is a mighty wind lifting up the lowly and tearing down the unjust mighty.

Make no mistake love is on the move and each day the calls for justice grow larger and more encompassing. The same life giving breath that breathed over the waters of creation breathes still, stirring up the hearts and minds of people all over the world. To keep our minds on that which is true, just, pure – is to affirm that whatever challenges, hardships, ugliness we may endure, God is in the midst of us and God will not be denied. All around me I encounter evidence that this isn't some pipe dream, but that this is in fact how God works.

Driving into church this morning I paused long enough to reflect on a lawn sign that is so standard now one could easily drive by it not giving it a moment's thought. Most days I don't – but this day I did. On it I saw a series of affirmations that I'm sure you know well by now:

- Black Lives Matter

- Love is Love
- No Human is Illegal
- Feminism is for everybody
- Science is real
- Kindness is everything.

In my wildest dreams I could not imagine such signs being a part of my childhood; even 5 years ago I could not imagine that a sign like this would be plastered along countless lawns.

When I was in seminary for the second time about 5 years ago, Eric Garner had the life choked out of him for selling loose cigarettes in front of a convenience store. The next day I commissioned 50 lawn signs declaring “Black Lives Matter” and plastered them all over the seminary’s campus – with their permission mind you. This was before Black Lives Matter became a movement – then it was just a statement that felt pretty innocent actually. I was so naïve. I was not at all prepared for the incredible backlash that would follow. I was shielded from much of the blowback – an unnamed, rogue student – but the anger and resentment that was hurled at these innocent signs haunted me for years. And then 2020 comes - the whole world is turned upside, hardship abounds, hate speech is on the rise and yet I can’t help but notice that every other house I look at has a Black Lives Matter sign. It’s a small thing, but every oak tree starts out as a small acorn.

It’s not foolish to listen to the advice of St. Paul this day. Paul is not advocating some naïve, escapism – Paul is encouraging bold, defiant faith that sees the darkness for what it is, and then transcends it with thoughts of holiness and love.

Memorize these instructions and May our lives reflect that our minds have been transformed because we've been too preoccupied by "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..." Amen.