

Lection: Philippians 4:1-9

A few years ago, one of you shared a story with me which I immediately recognized as a story in search of a sermon. I told it then, and I want to share it again this morning. This story begins the day before the annual church bazaar. A woman by the name of Alice had promised to bake something for the bazaar, but she had forgotten to do so and at the last moment, remembered. She quickly threw together the ingredients for an angel food cake, her specialty, but the cake failed. When she removed it from the oven, she discovered that the center of the cake had fallen flat. In panic, she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. In the bathroom, she found a roll of toilet paper. Artfully, she placed it in the center of the sagging cake and iced the entire thing to perfection. Late in the afternoon, she took the cake to the church as the women gathered to set up the Bazaar to be held the next morning.

Alice went home and called her daughter, and begged her to be at the church the moment the Bazaar opened and to buy the angel food cake and bring it home. The daughter went to the bazaar, but when she rushed to the bake goods table, the cake had already been sold. Alice was beside herself.

The next day, Alice had been invited to the home of another member of the congregation for an afternoon of bridge. When she

looked at the food table her hostess had carefully prepared, she was mortified to notice that her cake appeared to be afternoon's desert. With horror, she began to get out of her chair to tell her hostess about the cake privately, but before she could do so another one of the guests remarked: "What a beautiful cake!" Alice sank back into her chair, when the hostess emerging from the kitchen, responded: "Thank you, I baked it myself."

Now there are probably at least a dozen lessons you and I might be able to learn from Alice's adventures with her Angel Food Cake. Lessons about honesty, and last minute efforts, and arrogance, and human foibles and good intentions gone south, and all the things that can go wrong in life and especially in organizations where people come together.

But that story and our scripture lesson for this morning, got to me thinking about the sort of people we are called to be individually and as a congregation. What sort of person are you? Chances are none of us here today has ever inserted a roll of toilet paper into a failed cake. That story is probably too good to be true, but doesn't it remind you of something you have done? Doesn't it remind you of a moment of embarrassment or disappointment with yourself?

Personally, I've never even made an angel food cake, but if we had the time today, I could tell you a dozen stories about times in my life when I have been embarrassed by my imperfection, times when

like the hostess in the story, I have taken more credit than was due or when I got away with something I knew to be a lot less than honorable. And the even scarier thing is that my beloved spouse could tell you several dozen more events that I have repressed or simply forgotten and I suspect that I am not alone in those thoughts.

Do you remember times when your temper or your impatience with yourself or others led you to act with smallness or stupidity? Did you ever go home from a meeting or a social event wishing that you had not opened your mouth and said what you said? Did you ever get caught in a lie or find yourself trapped in a useless argument about a questionable idea or a less than loving attitude? Have you ever allowed your temper to put your mouth in the wrong gear? Are those negative moments the things which define who we really are?

Well, let me say a couple of very simple words that I believe to be profoundly true. First of all, there is never a future in the past when it comes to our lives, public or personal. Dwelling on what you did or did not do at those moments when your behavior was less than stellar is a waste of time. And second, the only value regret has in anyone's life is the sincere intention to do better the next time. Did you hear that? Failure is human, imperfection is the reality, but regret is a dead-end that denies everything Jesus tried to say and do when he walked this good earth.

How did Jesus say it? “I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly?” That’s what he said. He did not say: I come to remind you of how wicked you are or what a miserable sinner you are, or what a terrible mess you have made of your life. He did not say, I come to offer you the threat of punishment so you will clean up your act.

Most of us already know entirely too much about our imperfections. Most of us are already living as trembling bundles of regret. Some of us even lay awake at night worrying about the things that we said and did which made us look small. Well, that’s dead-end thinking. That’s life denying thinking. That’s wallowing around in the mud of our humanity.

And at this point, I want to invite you to use your imagination a little. I began with the story of an angel food cake disaster and while I don’t know what happened next in that story. Imagine that the hostess cut that cake and discovered what it was really made of. Imagine that role of toilet paper popping up right in the middle of that bridge party when the hostess went to cut it? Imagine the whole bridge club looking on? Think about the anger and the embarrassment. Consider the crisis between those two women and the others there. Can’t you just see the conflict that then resulted in the life of that church when those women choose up sides and began to play the blame game? Do you have the picture in mind? It might well

have become one of those colossal brew-ha-has that every one of us have seen and perhaps participated in.

Well, the same thing or something very much like it was happening in the church in Philippi. I don't think it was a bogus angel food cake, but it was something. And two people—one named Euodia and the other named Syntyche were angry with one another and upset about something which happened in that church. And their friends in that congregation had become warring parties in the disagreement. And Paul is writing a letter to the church, attempting to bring peace.

And in that situation of conflict and pain, Paul lays out the way of Jesus. He applies the light of God's love to the angel food cake conflict that's taking place. And I have to tell you that the way of Jesus is another way altogether. Building on the promise of eternal and abundant life in Jesus, Paul lays out a fairly clear road map that can lead you and me away from the angel food cake messes we get ourselves into, to a path that is truly the way of the angels.

And here's what he says: step one on the path, Paul says is to rejoice. Rejoice, and again he says rejoice—cherish the unconditional nature of God's love for you. Remembering that nothing you have ever done, or nothing that you perceive another has done to you, nothing you think about, none of the challenges of this life, whether you cause them or someone else causes them, can dim the promise of God's love.

It is a given, more certain than the sunrise, more common than the air we breathe.

Now, what happens to you or to me when we get angry? What is it that takes over when we focus in on the negative? What goes wrong in the human psyche when hurt turns to hate? We settle for ideas that are smaller than life. We argue about things as stupid as an angel food cake and miss the angels around us all the time. We cave into feelings which deny our very nature as the children of God's love. When we devote our precious life energy to despising or disparaging another, the first casualty is our own peace of mind. And so Paul says, no matter what happens, rejoice. And that's a positive attitude, an attitude that lifts us up and turns us around the sets us on the path to abundant life.

And then Paul says if you want to walk in the way of the angels, find a way in every situation to be gentle; to be gentle with yourself and gentle with the people around you. I'm not sure I can explain this fully, but over and over again, I have noticed that most of the prejudice and a good deal of the intolerance and judgmental attitudes that I hear being expressed by religious people and by a whole bunch of Christians has its source in a failure of gentleness and compassion. Hate speech and bigotry is not the way of the angels. Small mindedness and intolerance is not the way of Jesus. It drives new nails into the very hands of Jesus—the hands of Jesus which were spread

out on the cross to embrace the whole hurting world in that most wonderful act of gentle love. To walk the way of the angels, be gentle with your self and with others.

And finally, Paul says if you want to travel the way of the angels, give your worries to God. Place all of those things which bother you and upset you into the hands of God's love. Give it to God and then embrace in your day to day life whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just and pure and excellent.

Do that and you will be able to walk away from those angel food cake moments life brings your way. Do that and you will truly walk in the way of the angels, the way of Jesus and in the process become more fully and more wonderfully the person God would have you be.

Amen.