

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“Being a Holy Head Case”**

**Psalm 4  
Philippians 4: 4 – 9**

**April 19, 2015**

So... what’s on your mind? I mean, really... what’s on your mind this morning, as we settle in for the Sunday sermon? Well, there are many things that *could* be on our minds, I suppose... for instance, you may be sneaking a quick peak at your watch right now, starting the little stop-watch feature... and wondering how long I’m going to stand up here preaching! Hoping, perhaps, that it won’t be *too* long! (Well, we’ll just see about that!)

You might be thinking about what you’ll have for lunch; or what you’ve already had for breakfast; or if church will get over early enough to beat the crowd at the restaurant of your choice! You might be wondering about the weather... or worrying about work... or fretting about the family... or nervous about the neighbors. You might be preoccupied with something that happened the week before... or concerned about something that *might* happen in the week ahead. You might be thinking about your children, or your parents, or your health, or your bills, or the baseball game coming up this afternoon... or any one of a million other things that conceivably could be on our mind.

And, of course, it’s altogether natural and appropriate that our minds should be filled with many things... because we’ve got many things to do. We’ve got many responsibilities to fulfill. We’ve got many claims upon our time, many drains upon our energy, many demands on our attention, many places to go... people to see... situations that we must personally attend.

That’s just a normal part of life. But the problem comes, of course, when where our *head* is at... doesn’t match up with where *we* are at, at the moment! Or, to put it another way, the problem comes when we need to be thinking about *one* thing... but are, instead, completely preoccupied with some *other* thing.

Like, for example, when Sylvia is explaining to me, in minute detail, exactly how she wants all the junk in our basement to be sorted, stacked, and stowed... while I’m glued to the TV trying to watch, in minute detail, the Masters Golf Tournament. Or when you’re sitting in a classroom somewhere, trying to concentrate on what your teacher is saying about the finer points of calculus... while all you can seem to think about is the fight you had with your boyfriend yesterday, or the ballgame you’ll be playing in tonight. Or when our kids keep trying to get our attention, to show us their latest Play-doh and finger-paint creation... while we’re wrapped up in paying bills, or fixing the leaky toilet, or trying to figure out why we can’t get our smartphone to work. (Actually, our kids could probably set aside their Play-doh and finger-paints and figure *that* one out for us!)

Anyway, that's about the time that we mess up, misstep, make a mistake, and fail to accomplish whatever it was that needed doing... or fail to see whatever it was that needed noticing... or fail to *hear* whatever it was that needed saying. Because even though our arms, and legs, and eyes, and ears are here... or there... or wherever it is they're supposed to be; our *minds* are somewhere else entirely. And instead of staying focused on, and devoted to, the project that's before us... we become distracted, and disoriented, and disengaged from our main priority. And we wind up being something quite a bit less than we might have been... for the people and the projects that were depending on us to be there for them, in that moment.

This state of affairs is summed up beautifully in a saying from the world of sports, that every coach in America has used at one time or another... and that's "***keep your head in the game!***" And what the coach means by "keep your head in the game" is, "remember *who* you are, *where* you are, and *what* you're supposed to be doing when you're out there on that field!" *Focus* on the task at hand... *concentrate* on the challenge before you... *pay attention* to your assignment... because if you don't, you're not going to be a successful member of the team.

"Keeping our head in the game" is an essential discipline for us to master... on the athletic field, in our workplace, in our family life, out in the community... *anywhere* that our presence and participation can make a meaningful difference. And in our lesson this morning from his letter to the Philippians, Paul the Apostle reminds us that "keeping our head in the game" is also an essential component of our faith, and our discipleship, and our day to day walk with the Lord.

In our text, we find Paul encouraging his Philippian friends to faithfully live out their calling as Christian disciples. The congregation in Philippi was one of Paul's most beloved group of friends... and he wants to make sure that they're doing all they can to grow in their faith, and serve the Lord Jesus with all their heart and strength. And so, he provides them with a sort of laundry list of "discipleship disciplines" to practice as they live and work together as a growing community of faith.

Paul encourages the Philippians to rejoice in all the various circumstances of their lives. He challenges them not to worry, but instead to calmly and prayerfully bring their needs to God's attention, and to trust in His gracious providence. He advises them to be gentle in their dealings with one another, and to allow that gentleness to be seen and imitated by all those around them. He asks them to continue in their efforts to "do what Paul would do," and to model their own discipleship after his inspiring example. He tells them never to forget, as they live out their life of faith, that Almighty God will be with them always... and that in serving Him, they would find peace.

Paul delivers *all* of this wonderful discipleship counsel to the growing Philippian church... and then he tells them one more thing. And what he tells them is, in essence, "***Hey, don't forget to keep your head in the game!***" Like a husband who needs to listen to his wife's advice, or a student who needs to pay attention to the teacher's lecture, or a parent who needs to heed the excited jabbering of a beloved son or daughter... the Philippians, too, need to *focus their attention* on the discipleship task at hand, if their efforts to live out Paul's vision of faith is going to come to fruition.

According to Paul, it's not enough to merely hear the exhortation, or to just skim over the list of instructions. No, for genuine spiritual growth and maturity to happen, our minds... our heads... our hearts have to be engaged in the process, too. And we must make sure that our *thoughts* are on the same page as our *actions*... as we seek to make progress in our life as Christ's disciples. And so, like a good football or basketball coach, Paul reminds his "players" in Philippi to "keep their heads in the game" of faith. Listen again to what he tells them:

*"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things."*

In other words, *"Philippians, keep your minds on the things of God! Keep your hearts beating in time with the Lord's will and wisdom. Dare to follow Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, to 'seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all that you need for life will be added to you.'"*

Paul's counsel to his friends was to keep their minds pointed in the direction of holiness, and righteousness, and love. Which was no small challenge, in a first-century world permeated by idolatry... and immorality... and greed. The Philippian church was floating in an ocean of evil, distraction, and sin. Yet Paul was still challenging them to look, and to think, and hope beyond all that debris of human fallenness... to the grace, and the goodness of God's Kingdom.

Because it was only by so doing that they'd be able to rise above their daily failings and frustrations... and to live into the new life of hope and salvation that Jesus had opened up for them with His life, death, and resurrection. To paraphrase the words of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, Paul was saying: *"Keep your minds on the things of God... and life will never be without Him!"* Such was the Philippians' challenge... and such became the Philippians life, as a church and a community of believers.

Which brings us back to this morning, and our own efforts to be like the Philippians before us... to grow in our love of, and commitment to, Jesus Christ... and to keep our "heads in the game" of Christian faith and discipleship. Of course, the challenge which Paul laid out for his friends in Philippi is *our* challenge, too... because, like the Philippians before us, if we're to make progress in our own life of faith, we've got to be as focused on that effort as they were.

Which, as we know, can be a whole lot easier said than done. Because life on twenty-first century Long Island is every bit as fraught with spiritual danger and distraction as was life in first century Philippi. The list of things that can occupy our thoughts and command our attention is nearly endless... and, while many of those things are not inherently bad or wrong, if we allow them to so consume us that we have no more time or energy to think of the things of God, then they become as spiritually detrimental to us as that which is openly evil.

We all understand the spiritual danger of indulging in thoughts of hatred... or lust... or greed... or envy. We're all pretty clear on the holiness hazards of dishonesty, and narcissism, and bigotry, and self-righteousness. Certainly we do well when we make the good-faith effort to banish those kinds of thoughts and feelings from our hearts and

minds. But we also need to be careful not to allow our hearts and minds to be overwhelmed with the not-so-bad things of our daily life... things which are part of the normal course of our existence, but which still need to be kept in balance with the good and holy thoughts which Paul commends to our practice of Christian faith.

We all know how all-consuming our work can become... how we can get totally absorbed in our daily responsibilities, and obligations, and comings and goings and running around. And life today is so absolutely crammed with distractions... with tweets, and twitters, and cell phones, and iPods, and Face Book, and sports, and reality TV, and everything else... that sometimes we've barely got time and energy to catch our breath, let alone to pay any attention to the presence of God in our midst.

We live in a culture of superficiality, and banality, and sound bites, and never-ending internet nonsense. And to us, in our sensory-overloaded, keep-everything-skin-deep world, Paul says:

*“Hey! Southamptonites! Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”*

Now, does that mean that we have to spend every waking minute with our minds tuned in to spiritual thoughts and reflections? No, of course not! Paul's not saying that we should *never* spend time thinking about the duties and responsibilities of our busy daily lives. But he *is* saying that we should allow time for the good stuff... for thoughts that tend toward holiness... for opportunities for reflection, to remind us of who we are, and to whom we ultimately belong, as God's beloved children.

And, while we're at it, we should also do our best to avoid filling our hearts and minds with things that don't lead us toward the Lord... or, worse, which lead us away from Him. Which isn't an easy discipline to follow... in the world in which we live. But the payoff is worth the effort... as we grow in faith, and deepen our understanding, and become more aware of the peace and presence of God amid all the days of our lives.

So, there's the challenge of the day... that you and I should become “holy head cases...” thinking on the things of God... as we live out our days in God's great creation.

May that be our quest, and may that be our goal! Today, tomorrow, and all the days of our life! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!