

Contemplating what Apostle Paul got right



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

There are times when the Apostle Paul sharpened his pencil and leaned into a line that lasts (no pencils in his day, of course). One of those sentences that still resonates, at least for me, is in his letter to the church in Philippi. “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8) Taking a break from relentlessly policing new Christian communities, using his pen as a scribal sword swung by an invisible Author, he stops to think that believing isn’t the only subject to preach about. Thinking matters too.

This passage in Philippians follows an instruction to “Let your gentleness

be known to everyone.” This may be a prerequisite to his call to truth, honor, justice — fundamental qualities of character evident in actions. Not simply qualities to sit back and think about, but to act upon. Yet, contemplating these has to be the first step. Once you’ve thought long and hard about them, studied them, listened and learned from experience, you can attempt to live them out in daily life. If you do, perhaps those things you consider to be pure and lovely will also show through in the gentle nature of your words and works.

I’m not a fan of Paul and his mission, essentially because he never met Jesus of Nazareth, then assumed his scribbles should be accepted as scripture. I once believed his letters were equal to all other “words of God,” including the teachings of Jesus, but his assumption of divine authority and his radical fracture of the human family, were unconvincing. However, like many other writings of the world’s religions, there are practical teachings hidden among the theological speculations. No doubt because Paul was writing this particular letter from prison, he had more time to think, hence

he encouraged his community to “think on” some things that mattered. He may not have considered that these things matter to people of many faiths and those who stand outside of faith.

Note the epistle writer doesn’t say “pray on these things.” He’s already talked about prayer, so here the focus is on serious reflection. The more famously preached parts of the letter attract — perhaps distract — readers to accepting the gospel of salvation, and pleasing God through religious activity. Yet in this text, something else happens. The mind takes center stage. In the quest to be faithful, what a believer thinks about is critical. Because he doesn’t dismiss the value of reason, a deeper understanding of basic ethical principles comes into play.

“Whatever is commendable.” This doesn’t depend on faith either. It draws attention to the good things that people do and should be commended for doing. It relates to respect for others, not necessarily for their actions on behalf of faith, but because it’s good to notice and acknowledge what deserves recognition. “If there is any excellence, any-

thing worthy of praise.” Whatever is excellent and praiseworthy ought to be lifted up and applauded, but it first has to be clear in the mind what might be considered excellent and worthy. Could some beliefs of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Pagans and others be worthy? Could Paul and his followers see a degree of excellence in the ethical guidelines of Humanists and other freethinkers?

I’ve often wondered if a biblical writer like Paul ever listened to and learned from people with divergent views of faithfulness, God and religion. Did he spend his life in a “bubble of belief” — his chosen faith — judging everyone who believed differently as hell-bound outcasts from the good graces of his God? As a prisoner, did he meet other prisoners with variant views, hearing their stories, commending “anything worthy of praise,” or was it all about converting to his point of view? Said another way, did he practice what he preached, pausing to ponder and think on those things that are innate to hu-

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manity? Were the true, honorable and just elements of others in his mind each time he encountered non-Paulistic

Christians in his culture?

Paul concludes his letter to the church in Philippi with greetings "to every saint." He was concerned for his own, the "holy ones," the true Christian believers (those who believed and thought like Paul). In my mind, this was an unfortunate shift in thinking com-

mon in religious history. If you and your followers are the saints — the pure, holy ones — everyone else becomes impure, judged unworthy. But if you keep coming back to contemplating the commendable, to a mind filled with the best ethical principles of the human family, your faith might just find comrades who

also seek excellence in their lives.

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