

Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Brillion, Wisconsin

Nov. 7 and 11, 2012
Second Sunday of Forward in Christ

Philippians 4:8-13

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” That’s arguably the best line out of one of literature’s most iconic children’s books, *The Little Engine That Could*. I love that book. It comes right out my childhood. I’m not the only fan. It’s so classic that even though the story is over one hundred years old the National Education Association still puts the book on it’s top 100 list.

The book is important and classic for one simple reason. It looks to heal a certain aspect of human brokenness – a can’t do spirit. “Shiny New Engine, won’t you please pull our train over the mountain? Our engine has broken down, and the boys and girls on the other side won’t have any toys to play with or good food to eat unless you help us.” “I can’t. I’m too good for you,” Shiny New Engine says in essence. So they ask Big Engine. “Big Engine, will you pull our train over the mountain?” “I can’t and I won’t. I’m too important for you,” Big Engine says in essence. So they try Rusty Old Engine, “Will you pull our train over the mountain?” “I cannot pull even so little a train as yours over the mountain. I’m too old and tired. I cannot. I cannot. I cannot.”

I can’t. That’s obviously not a steam engine problem. That’s a human spirit problem. Notice that although the three steam engines gave different rationales for their can’t do spirit they all had the same basic problem. They were unwilling to get outside of themselves to help in a cause bigger and more important than themselves and so they said, “I can’t.” That’s the human problem that God fixes today with his powerful, powerful message in Philippians 4. Watch God work inside you today to say, “I can!”

I suppose before you can say, “I can,” or, “I can’t,” to anything you need to know what the challenge is. See if you can pick out the challenge that had confronted Paul and the Philippians. **“I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” (v. 10-11)** Sometimes Paul is Mr. Blunt. Sometimes he is Mr. Tactful. Here’s he’s the second one. It makes sense that he becomes Mr. Tactful. It’s never easy to talk about when or how someone is supporting you. Do you see how Paul is doing that? He talks about the Philippians “renewing concern” and learning “to be content whatever the circumstances.” Pretty tactful approach to how they were supporting him, wouldn’t you say?

Maybe it's surprising to you that Paul would discuss such a thing as a paycheck, but that's what this was. The Philippians were supporting Paul in his missionary work. Somebody had to. Life's not free. The Philippians helped pick up his tab. And they did it alone – at least in the early days. Paul says that point blank later in Philippians. Here's his quote: **“As you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel... not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; (and here's the part that gets me!) for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need.” (v. 15-16)** They supported Paul even when he was in another city! That's pretty generous giving. That'd be a bit like Trinity paying Pastor Nommenson's salary over in Reedsville because they wouldn't or couldn't do it. That's the kind of spirituality that the Philippians had.

The Philippians supported Paul so he could be an apostle. That's the thing about gospel ministry. It's personnel. Kids don't teach themselves and sermons don't come about magically. It's personnel. I'm not a numbers guy, but I believe that somewhere over 70% our church budget is personnel. It's not the printing or the heating or the pews that get super expensive. It's providing for personnel that gives us the sticker shock. That brings us to our “I can” or “I can't” moment. The question is: can I or can I not support God's work in a new and important way? And not to be a downer, but we as a church just upped the ante. We want to call a third pastor and at the same time we're renewing our commitments to paying off the building.

It's for good reason that in *The Little Engine That Could*, there are three “I can't's” for every “I can.” There is a real and powerful part of our nature that sees this opportunity and just begs us to say, “I'm all tapped out. I can't.” Paul highlights that. **“I know what it is to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content whatever the circumstances.” (v. 12)** Do you see what Paul is saying? “I can” does not come to us naturally. We have to know a secret. Paul makes that very clear. When Paul said, “I have learned the secret,” he used a word that was used to talk about the secrets that you couldn't know until you joined a secret society or religion. I've heard that today members of the Masonic Lodge have secret rituals that nobody else knows until they join. That's the idea here. Paul is saying, “God must take you into his inner sanctum to teach you and then you will know *the* secret to a generous life.”

Let me tell you how this is true from my experience. Keep in mind I'm going to speak strictly from a human perspective. I'm never quite there. Ever. There's always a new financial goal. It's paying for groceries and a place to live. It's paying off student loans, and then it's saving for retirement. The minute I pay one bill, there's another one. The minute I save up enough for something, there's something else to save for. Thinking like that makes our lives a financial treadmill. We're always chasing always grasping always reaching, but never arriving. Living like that is frustrating and tiring, but then again idolatry always is. Money is a cruel, cruel master. It has no love for you and no loyalty to you. Let me be frank. Money has a long history. He takes his people by the hand. He walks them right off the edge and right into the Abyss. And you know you've started your walk with him when you say, “I can't give.”

There is a way to climb off the financial treadmill. There is a way to financially arrive. There is a way to take your hand out of money's grasp. There is a way to walk away from the Abyss. Learn the secret. Feel the weight of the secret as Paul leads up to it, **"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."** (v. 12-13) Such an important passage! Think through how comforting it is. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. I can do. Not – I won't. Not – I can't. I can do. It's forward looking. It's confident. It's a can do spirit. And it's everything. There's no part of life that this attitude doesn't touch. It's everything. And then comes the secret that Paul's been promising. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. That's *the* secret! That's it right there! There is no life situation where God says, "Eh. I'm not going to share my infinite resources anymore. I'm all out." God is the bottomless fountain. He is the endless source of power, blessings and resources. He will never dry up. When you are tapping into God's power through faith, there is not a thing that you cannot do. Not a thing. Super comforting stuff. Go home and highlight it in your Bible. When you need a pick-me-up go open up to Philippians four and say with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Everything!" And get some fire in your eyes when you say it! I can!

Now's let's put this passage firmly into its context. I know that's sort of strange to do because a lot of times we use this passage to say, "I can write this paper for my history class," or "I can give a good job interview," or "I can play a good basketball game." But this time I want to use this passage to encourage you in the same part of life that Paul was getting at with the Philippians. You have strength to say, "I can," to giving. Because... you're not living on a financial treadmill. You're living on a financial promise. You're not living an always reaching always grasping always chasing financial life. You're living an "I have finally arrived" financial life. How can I say that? Through God, you have an unending stream of everything you'll ever need. Do you know what that makes you? That makes you financially independent. You can do everything through him who gives you strength. That's a truth that Paul could never quite get away from. Look at how Paul concluded his message to the Philippians. **"And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."** (v. 19)

Notice what that passage doesn't say. It doesn't say that God meets our needs according to the bare essentials. It does say he meets our needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. And, honestly, there's a big part of me that feels that our church family couldn't be a better case study of that. I remember when I first got to Brillion driving up to this building and thinking, "This is where I work?! This place is gorgeous and amazing!" And speaking of finances, I can't even remember the last quarter we've had to borrow and we're ahead on paying off this building. I haven't even started talking about the hundreds of volunteers, the nine full time called workers (hoping for ten soon), and the new coordinators we're adding to our ministry team. These are our blessings and these are our resources. But there's one resource... there is one blessing that will never, ever dry up. We have our big, huge, infinite, always giving God through whom we can do everything. He is *the* secret!

“I’m not very big,” said the Little Blue Engine. Then she thought about the toys and dolls that need to be delivered to the boys and girls on the other side of the mountain and she said, “I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” You may say, “I don’t have much.” But then you think of how big and huge and infinite your God is. That is when the words of the Little Blue Engine become yours, “I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” Actually, we wouldn’t say that. We’d say this, “I know I can. I know I can. I know I can.” I can do everything – everything! – through him who strengthens me. I told you. God got you there. Notice that the question “Can I generously give to my church’s mission and vision?” doesn’t hang there anymore as a question. Now it’s a conviction. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Amen.