

Sermon – Whatever  
Sunday, October 11, 2020  
Exodus 32:7-14, Philippians 4:1-9  
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Our first scripture reading is Exodus 32:7-14. The Israelites have just received the ten commandments on Mount Sinai and in their impatience with Moses' delay coming down from the mountain for whatever reason, they create idols, a flagrant breaking of the first commandment. The God who first appeared to Moses in the burning bush which did not consume is now burning with anger and ready to consume the people who lack appreciation, respect, and integrity. However, through Moses' intervention, God absorbs God's anger and rather than consume the people, God offers mercy and a second chance. Hear now, God's Holy word.

*<sup>7</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; <sup>8</sup> they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" <sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. <sup>10</sup> Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."<sup>11</sup> But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup> Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" <sup>14</sup> And God changed God's mind about the disaster that God planned to bring on God's people. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Philippians 4:1-9. Paul closes this very personal letter to his beloved congregation in Philippi, a letter he writes from prison, with words of affection and encouragement to be steadfast and to "stand firm in the Lord" in whatever circumstances. Paul is concerned about their ability to withstand various pressures without his presence and wants nothing to undermine their faith. Hear now, the Word of God.

*<sup>4</sup> <sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia (e o dia) and I urge Syntyche (Sin te ge) to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,<sup>[b]</sup> help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. <sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Amen.*

The title of the sermon - "Whatever"

*The text: Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just...pure, pleasing, commendable...think on these things.           Philippians 4:8*

Let us pray, Holy and loving God, thank you for your steadfast love in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This morning I invite us to reflect on the word "whatever," inspired by a 2014 HuffPost article written by Kevin Belmonte, author of the award-winning biography, William Wilberforce: A Hero for Humanity. Over six years Belmonte was the lead historical consultant for the highly acclaimed film, "Amazing Grace" which drew extensively from his biography on Wilberforce. For several years, the paperback edition has been required reading for a course on leadership and character at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Wilberforce is the middle name of the Reverends Trajan and Sarah McGill's son, Scott.

The story of William Wilberforce is the remarkable account of how one man's vision, courage, faith, and relentless pursuit of justice brought freedom to thousands and changed the course of history as a leader in the movement to abolish the slave trade in England during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wilberforce's Christian faith was essential to whatever he did.

In later years, Wilberforce supported the campaign for the complete abolition of slavery. That campaign led to the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which abolished slavery in most of the British Empire. Wilberforce died three days after hearing that the passage of the Act through Parliament was assured.

Two years later in 1835 across the Atlantic, this congregation was founded in Springfield, IL by men and women of faith with abolitionist convictions and positive initiative to advocate justice and freedom in our country. Today, we continue that advocacy as people of faith acknowledging the sin of slavery and affirming that black lives matter in whatever we say and in whatever we do.

Kevin Belmonte's thoughtful article on the word whatever in the Bible is an important reminder to us during this time and place. Last year Mrs. Karen Sherrick, our Director for Children's Ministry, created a lesson for the third, fourth and fifth graders in our Bridges Midweek Fellowship exploring the meaning of "whatever" in Scripture.

In our culture, that little generalized word "whatever" has come to indicate indifference or apathy, an attitude of "who cares." It is our response to anything we do not like but cannot avoid, or to anyone whose opinions become tiresome. It is the verbal shrug of the shoulders and a nod to our inability or unwillingness to shape or to change our world.

This is not so in the Bible. Rather than indicating indifference or apathy, the word "whatever" highlights the importance of duty, civility, self-control, respect, and standing firmly in our faith. In Scripture "whatever" is a term indicating the totality of our commitment to God. It also speaks to the totality of God's commitment to us, namely that whatever the circumstance, nothing can separate us from the love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Woven throughout Scripture with 173 references to whatever in the NIV, Belmonte highlights a few in his article:

- Beginning with words spoken by the children of those who betrayed Moses in our first reading to declare their loyalty to the One who brought them out of the land of Egypt, the One whose mind was changed, and who showed mercy instead of wrath. “*Whatever* you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go” (Joshua 1:16).
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, directs the servants at the Wedding in Cana when the wine runs out, saying: “Do *whatever* he tells you” (John 2:5).
- Jesus speaking in Matthew 25: “Truly I tell you, *whatever* you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).
- In Peter’s epistle, we read: “Each of you should use *whatever* gift you have received to serve others (1 Peter 4:10).
- The Preacher in Ecclesiastes exhorts: “*Whatever* your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).
- The Apostle Paul adds: “And *whatever* you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17).
- And, again, in Philippians, Paul exhorts: “*Whatever* happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of God” (Philippians 1:27).
- “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, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8).
- And lastly Paul reminds us, “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

This is the Reformation cry of Soli Deo Gloria, or SDG for short, “To God Alone be the Glory.” As one of the five “solae” or “onlies” during the reformation, SDG became the recurrent signature of Johann Sebastian Bach as he penned these initials at the conclusion of each of his musical masterpieces to remind us that indeed all the glory belongs to God, whatever and forever. Likewise, may we underscore each day of our lives with the initials SDG.

God is the God of whatever, beloved! Whatever happens and whatever the circumstance, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us and who is our home. To God be the glory. Amen.