

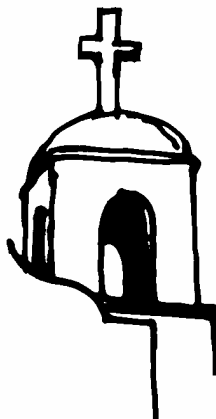
# **Cross Roads, Part 3:** *An Alternate Word*

Sermon by

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**June 8, 2008**



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*First United Methodist Church of Winter Park*

*On the move to make a difference through Jesus Christ.*

**Cross Roads, Part 3: *An Alternate Word***  
**Jeremiah 29:11, Philippians 4:10-13**

In case you wondered, I am not Shevon Kaufman who is listed as the speaker in this morning's bulletin. Shevon is the daughter of a friend of mine. She has a tremendous story of faith to share and I had invited her a couple of months back. She is in fact here, but unfortunately became ill during the night and is in her hotel room as we gather here for worship. She called me at about a quarter-to-six this morning, so you are stuck with me this morning, and hopefully we'll be able to have another opportunity to invite Shevon to be with us. I'll tell you a little bit more about why I think it would be important to have her share with us in my remarks as we go along in a few moments.

Do you know anyone whom you would say has what we might call "the disease of discontent?" Someone from whom you have come to expect a negative response to questions that you throw their way, almost no matter what the subject is?

"So, how are you today?"

"Oh, OK, I guess. But it's so hot outside."

"How was your trip?"

"We really didn't have enough time to do the things we wanted to do, and besides that we felt tied down to the folks we were staying with."

"How was your night out last week?"

"The service was terrible in the restaurant, and there was this person behind us in the movie theater who kept talking. I had a terrible time."

Paul says, "I have the cure for the disease of discontent. In fact, I know how to live a contented life because I have learned to be content with whatever I have."

Paul tells us through these short verses in his Letter to the Philippians that this is true for him because he knows that contentment is a matter of focus. It's what you look at. It's what you focus upon. It's where you aim your gaze.

Most of you know at least the synopsis of the story of Victor Frankl. Frankl spent years in a Nazi prison camp in which he and others were subjected to subhuman treatment that threatened their lives, as well as their sense of worth and dignity as human beings and their overall physical wellbeing.

It was out of that experience that Frankl wrote an inspiring, insightful, moving book called *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he describes his experience and develops a psychotherapeutic process that he calls logotherapy. Out of his own prison camp experiences Frankl documented the remarkable coping capacities of human beings to preserve their sense of inner freedom. At one point he writes,

*We who lived in concentration camps can remember men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last pieces of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

What Frankl labeled "the last freedom" is the freedom to choose one's own way, the sense of freedom that gives us an amazing capacity to cope in the midst of life's varied experiences.

As Paul puts it, "I have learned to be content in all things."

There's a particular word that describes what Paul is talking about. The word is *attitude*.

There's a story about a cranky older gentleman who lays down to take a nap. To have a little fun, his grandson put some Limburger cheese on his mustache, right under his nose.

Grandpa woke up, got up off the couch and shouted, "This room stinks!"

He walked all through the house, shouting louder, “This whole house stinks!”

He walked outside onto the porch and shouted, “The whole world stinks!”

The truth, of course, is that it was Grandpa who stunk. The problem literally was right there under his nose.

I think there’s a life lesson present in that silly little story, and it’s this: More often than not, when we begin to feel that things around us stink, the problem is not with the world, it’s not with others, *it’s with ourselves*. Chances are good our attitudes have become negative – and many times, if we can change our negative attitudes, then we change our view on the world.

Our attitude is an extremely important aspect of who we are. It’s more important than circumstances... more important than what other people say... more important than our past... more important than our education... more important than how much money we have.

Attitude has to do with a whole lot more than – it’s much deeper than – a few thoughts that we might or might not let into our minds. It emerges out of the core of who we are. It’s our disposition... it’s our outlook on life... it’s the very core of our character.

There’s a verse from Proverbs that says it well:

*As a person thinks, so he is.* Proverbs 23:7

A woman had a jar filled with water. She put a lid on it, very loosely. Then she shook the jar vigorously and water spilled everywhere. She asked other people in the room why the water had spilled. One person said it was because she had put the lid on loosely. Another said it was because she had shaken the jar. Still another said the law of gravity was at work. Different reasons were offered, and she shook her head at each one.

“No,” she said, “none of those are the reasons. The reason the water came out of the jar is because the jar was filled with water... and what’s on the inside always comes out.”

It's true, you know: *what's on the inside always comes out*. The attitudes inside of us are like a jack-in-the-box. Often when we least expect it, they will pop out and show clearly what's inside of us. Much louder than the specific words we use are the attitudes that keep telling others what we really are like.

Perhaps you've heard this little verse before:

*Two men were behind prison bars;  
Both looked out;  
One saw mud, the other saw stars.*

They're in the same place... they're looking out the same window... looking out at the same world. What's the difference? That one happened to look up and the other down? No. The difference is in their attitudes.

Victor Frankl came to realize that no matter what happened in that prison camp, he still had the power to choose his own attitude. And it was that realization, he wrote later, that enabled him to survive and even to foster a creative experience in the midst of the most difficult time of his life.

Paul had learned the same thing before he wrote his famous letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi while he himself was sitting in a prison cell. It was in that context that Paul said, "I have learned to be content in all things."

No matter what happens to us... no matter what we go through in life... the choices that we make about our attitudes are always ours. Ironically, this one thing that no one can take away from us often is the very thing that we are quick to give away to other people. Many of us very easily blame our negative attitudes on others, when really they are always our own choice.

Shevon Kaufman, whom I'd hoped would be sitting right here in her wheelchair this morning, is the daughter of one of my closest friends, Dan Johnson who is the senior pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Florida.

Shevon is 30 years old, she has been married to Eric for seven years. They have a three year old son, Ethan, and they are expecting their second child whom they believe to be a girl, and are quite excited about the possibility of having one of each.

Eric and Shevon had been married for just one month over a year when Shevon was leaving school – they were both teachers at Deland High School. She was at a traffic light at an intersection that crossed Highway 92 in Deland, had a green light, started through the intersection, and the person driving a car headed east on 92, going somewhere between 60 and 65 miles an hour, ran the red light and smashed right into the driver's side of the car that Shevon was driving. If she were here this morning, she would be sharing with you a picture of that car up on the screen, and if you saw it you would be amazed that she is still alive.

I heard about what happened the next morning and got in the car and drove to Daytona to Halifax Medical Center where Shevon had been airlifted late the afternoon before. I hung out all day with Dan and his wife Jan, with their son, with Eric, Shevon's husband and other people who were in and out. Numerous times we formed a circle around her bed and prayed for her, and that day we weren't sure at all if our prayers for her life would be answered... that day or the next day or the next day or for weeks after that.

Shevon did live. She spent months in rehab facilities working very, very hard. She finally went home the following summer, close to a year later. And, as you can imagine, her life has never been the same; nor has Eric's. A twenty-three and twenty-five year old young couple,

newly married, no children, enjoyed camping and going to the beach, on their weekends they liked to run in 5k and 10k races... and now her life is totally changed.

She's in a wheelchair most of the time. She can walk a little bit with great assistance and in a pretty labored manner. She had some brain damage that has affected her speech, and while she can talk it is quite an effort for her to do so. But I'm telling you what: Shevon Kaufman, in the depth of her agony also turned to the depth of her faith, and she has learned that she can be content in all things.

Jeanne and I picked up Shevon and Ethan at the airport Friday afternoon – Eric is on a business trip, not able to be with them here this weekend – and we went to have lunch together and I began to learn a lot, quickly, about what it meant to be chauffeuring someone around who is normally in a wheelchair. We got to the hotel where we had reserved a handicapped accessible room, lugged her stuff up to the fifth floor and found out that it was not a handicapped accessible room. Needless to say I was not a happy man in that moment.

Trying to be really nice, and remember who I am and be professional about it, I called down to the front desk and was told, “Uh, sir, you do have a handicapped accessible room.” To which I replied, “No, we don't have a handicapped accessible room and frankly I am standing in that room right now, looking at it, and there is nothing handicapped accessible about it.”

Well, she told me she would get back to me in a minute and when she calls me back she says, “We don't have a handicapped accessible room from Mrs. Kaufman.”

Here I am, talking to you about attitude. Mine was not good, OK? And I'm grateful that none of you were there to hear my end of the conversation. In fact, Jeanne was there with Shevon and Shevon's aunt who had come to join her, and at one point Jeanne said something,

trying to be helpful, and I snapped at her and she snapped back at me saying, “You know this is not my fault.” To which I replied, “You’re right, I’m sorry.”

Shevon said, as if to make me feel better, “You know, you’re responding just like my dad would respond if he were here...” So I can’t wait to talk to Dan.

Long story short, we got everything worked out, they identified a room for us, we got Shevon settled in, and then she and I got back in the car to come back here to do a test run on some things for this morning. We’re driving away from the hotel and I said, “You know, a part of me is glad this happened, because I have learned so much, in this short time, about what it must be like to live your life day to day.” She nodded her head, grinned, and looked at me like, “if you only knew.” And then I said, “I bet you experience this kind of thing all the time, don’t you?”

She said, “Yeah, I do.”

I asked, “How do you deal with that?”

She said, “You know, I learned a long time ago that I can either choose to allow the experience that I had ruin my life and make me bitter and angry all the time, or” she said, “I can choose to rely on my faith in Christ to give me a different attitude, and to look for what is positive and good in the life around me.” She went on and said, “You know, we’ve had a great day. I flew down here, Ethan and I got to visit with you and Jeanne over lunch, we got to catch up and meet your daughter and granddaughter...” And then she said, “And it worked out with the room... everything is okay.”

I’ve got to tell you, I learned a lot yesterday, before I even knew I was going to be sharing this message with you today. From this thirty year old woman whose life was changed forever by an automobile accident, over which she had no control, seven years ago.

I'm not suggesting that a positive person refuse to recognize and admit the negative aspects of life... not at all. In fact, one of the things that bugs me most is to see people of faith caught up in what I call a religious denial system. That is, pretending that things in life are always wonderful even when they aren't... that tough times really are not so tough, even when they are. There is the reality of difficult times in life and it makes no sense to deny them. All of us have been there. Shevon certainly has been there, and she can talk about her struggle to get through some of those times.

Often, however, those tough times are made tougher because of a tendency to dwell on them... a tendency to look for the negative, to wallow in it, to be consumed by it... to refuse to see the positive that also is there.

Positive thinking doesn't ask us to deny the tough times. It doesn't ask us to deny reality. It does continually push us to look for the best results even in the worst possible conditions. We're talking now about exercising our God-given gift of faith that in every problem there exists a solution, that in every time of despair, there exists a measure of hope, that in every time of darkness, there exists the light of God's creative Spirit.

Hence, Paul can say, "I have learned to be content in all things." Hence, Shevon can say, "I have learned to be content in all things." And of course, Paul makes that statement, Paul lives that attitude, as does Shevon, out of the context of their faith in Jesus Christ. When we accept the gift of God's love through Jesus into our lives – not just when we believe it intellectually, but when we really accept it deep within our being – it gives us a new outlook, a new perspective. It gives us a new attitude in regard to the various dimensions and experiences of life.

To be a follower of Jesus and not to allow our deeply ingrained negative perspectives and attitudes to change is like living on top of a gold mine and never being willing to do the mining.

In his classic book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale tells a story about a husband and wife, strangers to him, across from whom he sat in a railroad dining car. The woman was dressed in an expensive fur, in diamonds and other flashy jewelry. She seemed to have all that she wanted materially, but she was having a very unpleasant time. She loudly proclaimed that the car was dingy... it was drafty... the service was terrible... and the food was not that great.

Her husband, on the other hand, was a gentle, easy-going man who had the capacity to take things as they came. Dr. Peale said the gentleman seemed a bit embarrassed by his wife's critical attitude. He also seemed disappointed, since he was taking her on this trip so they could have a good time together.

To change the direction of the conversation, the man asked what business Dr. Peale was in, and he said that he was a lawyer. Next he made a statement that no doubt he paid for later when he added with a grin, "My wife is in the manufacturing business."

"Oh?" responded Dr. Peale, "and what does she manufacture?"

"Unhappiness," said the gentleman. "She manufactures her own unhappiness."

I suppose many of us are like that at various times in our lives. Almost certainly when a person is unhappy with others... when a negative attitude toward the world prevails... it's a sure sign that that person is also unhappy with himself or herself, and that a negative attitude prevails within.

The good news proclaimed by the church is that Jesus came to change us from the inside out. Jesus came to transform us, to clean out the old and bring in the new. In the Gospel of John, 10:10, Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it to the full," or "that you might have it abundantly."

This positive attitude that I'm talking about isn't something that someone else can make happen for you. It can only be an inside job. It comes from being in touch with God's Spirit in ways that enable you to be content in the face of wherever you are in life. It's a choice. And it's what God wants for all of our lives. In fact, God wants that so much that he came into the world to make it possible.