

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 Pastor Bill Uetrict 12/14/23 3 Advent

Sometimes when I read the Bible I wonder if there is not an over-the-topness to what some of the writers are saying. I mean, what do you make of Paul today in First Thessalonians? “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” That seems over the top to me. How can you always rejoice, particularly when you are really blue? How can you pray all the time? Don’t you have other things to do? How do you give thanks in all circumstances, especially when there are many things you are just not grateful for? Paul’s invitation seems like an expectation that just cannot be met. He is over the top.

Maybe, and maybe the discipleship of Jesus does involve some over-the-topness. He does seem to have big expectations. But I note that after Paul’s invitation to rejoice and pray and to give thanks always he offers three more imperatives that suggest that life isn’t easy, that rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks comes in the midst of a context, in the midst of a life that is full of struggle. Paul says, “Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

This sounds like a man who knows that life is a real mixed bag. Paul is no rose-colored-glasses kind of guy. He knows that life is tough. He realizes that life brings with it new experiences, new challenges, new voices that serve to unsettle us. Listen to those voices, Paul seems to be saying, but don’t fall for everything because there are destructive prophets, people who want to send you down bad paths. You need to work hard to discern what is true and helpful. Everything that comes your way is not worth buying into. Hold onto that which is good but come to grips with the fact that such holding on requires you to resist that which is evil. People aren’t always good. Even the good people aren’t always devoid of evil. In fact, that which is good and good people are sometimes the source of evil.

So, as Paul invites us to rejoice always, to pray unceasingly, and to give thanks in all circumstances, I don't think he is starry-eyed. He seems to know the struggles that characterize life. Maybe then life is this wild dialogue between the call to rejoice, the invitation to pray unceasingly, the encouragement to give thanks in all circumstances and the reality of struggle, testing, and resisting. Life is harsh sometimes. It can be mean. It is full of that which can lead us to despair, full of that which can steal our joy, make us give up on a dynamic relationship with God (prayer), cause us to be bitter, not grateful. That is real life. Yet at the same time, life is full of that which invites us into deep joy, into deep communion with God, into a sense that everything that is is sheer gift.

In the middle of all of his imperatives today, Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit." Don't try to extinguish the vibrant, life-giving, energetic work of the Spirit of God. Let it come forth. Now I wonder if it is possible to quench the work of the Spirit. I have this sense that the Spirit will do the Spirit's work, whether we prevent that work or not. But Paul wants us to participate in that work, to be open to it, to allow it to come forth. The Spirit is at work, Paul believes. Don't get in the way of the flow of grace, love, forgiveness, and mercy. Let the Spirit work through you so that you can pass on those divine realities. Let go. Don't allow your crabbiness, your neediness, your desire to control to stop the joy. Get out of the way, even and especially when you are in the midst of sadness and lament.

Oh, the number of experiences I have had with people in very sad situations who, because of their need to control and not be vulnerable, stop the flow of good grief. The Spirit is present, even during deep grief. That is what the cross tells us. The Spirit is present even in pain. Don't quench the Spirit. Be open to allowing the work of the Spirit to come

forth even amid life's biggest challenges and deepest hurts. Even in death the Spirit is deeply present. Even in death, there is joy.

I like what William Loader says about Paul's invitation to rejoice always. According to him, joy is not about "being high. It is not the antithesis (the opposite) to pain and suffering. It is not an antidote (the answer) to the cross or Gethsemane (where Jesus struggled in prayer with God about his future)." No, Loader says, "It is an attitude which finds life [at the cross] and finds nurture and rest in feeding on brokenness and a poured-out life." Being joyful is not the same as being happy or constantly positive. Joy is much deeper than that. It is an orientation toward life that realizes that hidden even in the worst of what life can bring us is the work of the Spirit, the God who is, as Paul says, "faithful." This work isn't always apparent. And it isn't always something that registers with us in our feelings. Amazingly, this work sometimes comes when we are experiencing our brokenness most fully or when we are giving up ourselves in lives of service to others.

This past week I visited a woman at a hospice house. Her cancer is spreading quickly, and so she was moved to a place where she could be taken care of in her last days or weeks. It really was a special visit, a visit that was for me filled with deep joy. The woman's children were present. I had never met them before. A sense of communion developed between the woman, them, and me, as we talked openly about death and what the woman wanted for her funeral. And as I left, I spoke to the hospice worker who had just done beautiful work in creating Christmas cookies to be shared with the folks who came in and out of this very home-like facility. It was clear that she had deep compassion for those she cared for. Deep within me was a sense of overwhelming gratitude for those who commit themselves to the dying. In the midst of grief, I experienced deep joy.

Joy really isn't always dependent upon our feeling up or buoyant. Joy comes when we know that what we are experiencing is not devoid of God's ability to bring life out of death. It comes out of a deep connection not simply to our own resources, but to resources that are much greater than ours alone, the resource, frankly, that God is. It comes as for some reason we are touched by the reality that life is a gift that we are privileged to participate in, even when that life brings us challenge after challenge.

I don't know about you, but I have had these experiences of small gifts, of brief comments or conversations, of encounters with people, the created world, even the thought world, in which life seems to be brought back to me. Suddenly, the sadness or the despair doesn't go away, but is experienced in a new light. The light that John the Baptist in the Gospel of John says he is to bear witness to shines on the struggles and challenges and makes me new, gives me a taste of joy. You know, it is interesting to me that sometimes I find that joy oozing in and out of me as I am preparing for and writing a sermon. Sometimes I am feeling a little crabby, a little disconnected to that which brings me joy, and then as I study, as I gather with others in Bible study, and as I write my sermon, I experience Something that, again, doesn't eliminate why I may be feeling sad, but brings light in the midst of the darkness. And joy visits me.

This coming Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent. In the tradition of the church, this Day has been known as the "Gaudete" Sunday. "Gaudete" is a Latin word for rejoicing. In the ancient church, Advent was thought to be a very penitential time, a time for repenting and fasting. "Gaudete Sunday" was thought to be a temporary reprieve from the seriousness of the season. You could let go of the fasting for the day. The focus was joy.

In many ways, the right focus for Advent is joy. The season that speaks of the coming of God, the coming again of the Christ, of God's deep involvement in life and in making the world what it ought to be, the season that highlights Emmanuel, God with us, God penetrating all that is—this season is a season to be taken to joy, not just when we are happy, but always.

So rejoice . . . always. Connect to the source of that joy . . . always. Give thanks for that source and for the joy . . . always! Pray unceasingly for that joy...always!

Over the top? Ya, probably. But lives that know the truth of the light that enlightens everyone and everything are lives that are willing to go over the top.