

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

We lit the 3rd candle on the Advent wreath today. This candle is known as the candle of joy. All of our lessons today anticipate the joy of Jesus coming into the world.

For review, the first candle represents hope in the words of the prophets who speak of a Messiah coming into the world. The second candle represents faith, especially of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem trusting in the word of angels. The third candle anticipates the joy of Jesus birth, and the fourth candle represents peace when the angels announce peace and goodwill to all the earth to the shepherds.

So for this sermon, I want to focus on joy. Maybe you have heard of the acronym Christians use for the word joy. Joy can be found when you put Jesus first, then others, then yourself. Jesus, Others, Yourself... Joy. But did you know that joy is actually one of the fruit of the Holy spirit from Galatians 5. Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit. You can't manufacture joy in your life. Joy comes as a gift of our faith.

On a scale of 1-10, how is your joy meter these days? It seems there are a lot of things out there that are trying to rob us of our joy. We all seem to have many worries and anxieties about our families, money, covid, the institutions we work in, our government, and the world's problems. I feel that when I can get through a week relatively unscathed it is a good week. I rejoice and take a deep breath and give thanks.

In our second reading from Philippians, the Apostle Paul has the audacity to exhort his hearers to "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice." He commands the church people to Rejoice always, not just sometimes.

How can he say this? After all, he is sitting in prison when he writes this letter of joy to the Philippian church. Paul's life is uncertain. He doesn't know if he will live or die. He wants to write to members of the church that he loves and who have supported his ministry to encourage them to keep going in the spreading of the good news of Jesus.

First, Paul can say this because he believes the Lord is near. He believed and preached that Jesus would be returning soon. This thinking would change people's perspective to count their days. To make each day count. To use each day to share Christ's love with others. I can say today that the Lord is near. When two or three gather in Jesus name is there among us. When we receive Holy Communion, Jesus promises to be with us in this meal. When you help a person in need, Jesus promises to meet you in the face of that person. What you do to the least of these, you have done unto me says Jesus in Matthew 25.

Second, Paul already believed his future was in God's hands. Paul didn't know which he preferred more... to live meant sharing Jesus longer, and to die meant he would be with the Lord and all those who have died in the faith. For Paul, knowing Christ crucified and risen meant everything to him. Any human accomplishments he had or privilege he had by his education, lineage, or affiliation with Rome or his Jewish faith, he considered it rubbish compared to surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord.

Third, Paul can rejoice because he could see how the Holy Spirit was bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ and the church was growing. Even though the Philippians had some conflict between two women leaders, they were working through it. Paul could still see that his purpose of spreading the gospel of Jesus was bearing good fruit in the world.

Paul is telling the Philippians that in the meantime... while he remains in prison... that they are to treat each other with gentleness... to be kind and do things that build up community... not tear it down. And when they are worried or anxious... to pray about it... and not only pray, but to pray with thanksgiving. And the promise a peace from

God, that surpasses all human understanding, will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally to conclude, I had a professor in Seminary, Dan Olson, a psychologist and pastor, who helped me understand a little more about joy. He was a golfer. When he was younger, he confessed that his joy on the golf course depended on how he played. He called this situational joy. But later in life, he discovered that true joy was just being able to get out on the golf course and be in God's good creation. It was less about how he performed. True joy vs. situational joy.

Every day, you can find a glimpses of joy... even if you are grieving, or living with systems that steal your joy. I had great joy yesterday in, that's right, presiding at the funeral of Timothy Laflin. Timothy had a disability all of his life, but it didn't stop him from experiencing true joy and blessing others. He loved all people and saw the best in people. He would often kiss women on the cheek and tell them how pretty they were. He made people smile with his big smile. He had a card ministry where he would make cards for the holidays and give them to people when he was out with his Dad at the Elks or the Dome. It was an honor to share God's promises for Tim through his faith and baptism in Jesus Christ.

Dear Siblings in Christ, we may not always be happy or feeling holly and jolly... especially this time of year. But know that you can experience true joy in knowing Christ Jesus. Jesus believing in him and his grace for us gives us confidence that we are loved now and have a future with hope.

As a result, we can "rejoice in the Lord always... again I say rejoice!"