

Advent 3 2008 Year B

Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“ Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.” 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-19

Today is the third Sunday in Advent. It is known as Rose Sunday, hence the rose colored candle in the Advent wreath. It is the one Sunday flowers can be placed on the altar during Advent. These flowers are given by the McKee's in honor of Jim's 92nd birthday.

The third Sunday in Advent is also known as Gaudete Sunday. When Advent was thought of as a little Lent and a more penitential season than how the church sees it today, the third Sunday was known for being a little bit more upbeat, a little less somber than the other three Sunday's in this season. Gaudete means “rejoice” in Latin and the readings for this Sunday in Advent concentrated on rejoicing. And so the first word in our epistle reading is just that, “rejoice.”

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest document in the New Testament, written a mere 15-20 years after the death of Jesus. This was the first church founded by Paul and they had a very special place in his heart. Unlike other churches that Paul founded this church was made up largely of converted pagans. Paul had convinced them to turn from the pagan gods of the Romans to the one true God in Jesus Christ.

This letter is Paul at his most pastoral. It seems that this new church is a little uncertain, a little tentative in their newfound faith. The pressure to revert to their old practices is mounting. They are experiencing some hostilities and persecution for no longer worshipping in the Roman temples and taking part in the cultic rituals and sacrifices. They are also wondering why Jesus hasn't returned yet and what is going to happen to those who died before his return.

Paul addresses the issue of those who have died in the community in Chapter 4 of this letter. What we read in chapter 5 is Paul telling them how to live, telling them what a life in Christ as a community of faith looked like. How they lived together, how they loved on another was a

crucial witness to the community around them. As they awaited Jesus' return, as they were living in the in between time of the already and the not-yet, they were to be an example of Christ's love to the world in the present as they lived toward the hope of being one with Christ in the future.

Paul tells them, "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Paul is emphatic about this. What Paul doesn't tell them is "rejoice when things are good, pray when you remember to, give thanks when things go your way."

Paul understands the pressures and demands they are under. Paul knows what persecution looks like and feels like. Paul knows that they are hurting and it is precisely because of the pressures, demands and persecution that he tells them to always live their lives in joy, making their very lives a prayer to God so that in all circumstances they are thankful to the One who brought them into being, the One in whom they bet their lives.

Paul knew that if they could ground their lives in Christ, if they could live from a place of faith and trust in God they would survive no matter the circumstances or hardships. Paul knew that if they started from a place of joy and thanksgiving they could look reality in the face and not despair.

"Well," we may think to ourselves, "That is all fine and dandy for the Christians back in Thessalonica 2000 years ago, but St. Paul didn't live through World War II and the destruction of six million Jews and six million non-Jews. St. Paul didn't live through the deaths of 20 million Russians or through Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Nagasaki."

Rejoice always? St. Paul didn't live through Korea or Vietnam or 9/11. Give thanks in ALL circumstances? Who is he kidding? He hasn't lost a child, a husband or wife in the prime of their lives. He hasn't had to face an economic meltdown that was global in scope and massive in its implications for life all over the world. He hasn't had to open his 401K statements and see his hard-earned savings drop 35% over the last year.

What could this lesson possibly mean to us in the 21st century? We are so very different than this new church. That may be, but we are also alike in ways that really matter and are very important.

We live in a time and place that has not seen the return of the Messiah, yet. We live in a time and place where the culture makes it very difficult to stay faithful to Christian values and where the pressures to revert to worshipping the idols of money, power, prestige and influence are immense. We live in a world where 47 million Christians face persecution daily. We live in a world that desperately needs a witness to a new kind of life, a new kind of community that is more than possible, it is promised!

I have a friend who several years ago said that her goal was to be thankful in everything and she knew it was going to be a huge struggle. About five years before our discussion she and her husband had been expecting their first child. She went into labor and experienced what is known as a prolapsed umbilical cord. This is where the umbilical cord presents first, not the feet or the head, but that life sustaining cord. This is an emergency of the first order and there was very little time to get to the hospital. By the time they got there their baby had died. My friend went on to say that she was really working on being thankful for that experience. She wasn't there yet and she had no idea when she would get to that place...but she knew she had to try.

Over the weeks and months that followed her struggle somehow changed. She told me that she had ceased being angry. She was still very, very sad but by trying to start from a place of thanksgiving and prayer she became more able to deal with the reality of her daughter's death and more able to deal with her own pain. She was able to look reality in the face, give it to God and let God redeem the experience. She was incapable of getting there alone; we all are. It was only in her faith community that she could take the time and expend the effort because she was with others that helped her to learn how to rejoice and give thanks. It was that community that sustained her in a quest many people thought absurd.

The rejoicing and thanksgiving that St. Paul calls us to is not some glib, pie in the sky, don't worry be happy attitude. That is not reality and that does not honor the pain or humanity of the situation. Would my

friend ever be “happy” that her daughter died? Of course not and that is not what St. Paul is telling us. St. Paul writes that when our lives are grounded in thanksgiving for God and God’s Son, when we approach everything with prayer, so much so that our lives are one continuing prayer, we will naturally live a life of rejoicing rather than a life of anxiety and despair. And in our time falling into anxiety and despair would be a very easy thing to do. But that is not what God wants for us.

Our challenge as the community of St. Matthew’s is to show the world another way, a better way, a way where God brings us into wholeness and where ALL things are created anew...All things; our pain, our suffering, our very lives and deaths.

Rejoice ALWAYS, pray without ceasing, give thanks in ALL circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Amen.