

REJOICE!

Sermon for Advent 3B—1 Thess 5:16-24

LPC, 12/14/14

Rejoice always. How's that for advice? Not just rejoice during the good times. Always. Give thanks in all circumstances. Not just make sure you thank God for your blessings. Be thankful for everything, always. We are told that this is no less than the will of God in Christ Jesus for us. If you've ever wondered what God's will for your life is, here it is: Rejoice and give thanks. That is what God wants you to do. That's what St. Paul says explicitly in the first letter to the Thessalonians, which we just heard.

Now, of course it's easy to rejoice and give thanks when you're feeling good. I was feeling particularly good when I composed this sermon. But feelings are mutable. Situations change. None of us is more than a heartbeat away from heartbreak, no matter how we try to protect ourselves.

Even the holidays, which are jolly for many of us, are pure hell for some of our neighbors. For some, it's very difficult to be around happy people when you're just not feeling all that happy yourself. Others of us are facing our first Christmas without the presence of someone who previously was the heart and soul of Christmas for us. If a person is facing personal tragedy the cheerful atmosphere of Christmas is terribly painful.

In response to this reality, some churches hold "Blue Christmas" services to minister to people for whom the holiday season evokes more pain than joy. It is easy for happy people to know they are loved by God. It is hard for sad people to know they are loved by God. It is also particularly important that sad people know they are loved by God, because they are.

I am happy now. But I remember being unhappy. I know people who are not happy. So what kind of directive is "Rejoice always. Give thanks in all circumstances"? I have four things to say about this.

First, although sometimes a bad situation is improved by simply putting on a happy face, sometimes the situation is simply too grave. If a loved one has died you can't make your grief go away by willing yourself to rejoice. Besides, and this cannot possibly be overstated, prayer needs to be honest. You can fool some of the people all the time, and all of the people some of the time. You can even fool yourself. But you can't fool God *ever*, so don't even try.

If you are too full of grief to rejoice, tell God. God's will for you may be for you to rejoice always, but God knows that that isn't possible in the world as it is. If God didn't know that before coming into the world as a human being, God surely knows it now, after being crucified, for heaven's sake.

God freely extends comfort to the broken. But pretending you're not broken when you are actually impedes the flow of God's grace. This is actually one of the ways

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to “quench the spirit,” as St. Paul puts it. Don’t do it. Be honest with God when you’re too broken to rejoice. That’s point one.

Point two: Rejoicing always and giving thanks in all things is like physical exercise. If you want to be the healthiest you can be, you exercise when you can, and then when you are unable to exercise because of illness or injury, you recover faster, because you are generally in better health due to the exercise you usually do.

Rejoicing and giving thanks are like that. When you practice joy and gratitude when you are able, you will find yourself sustained in sorrow to a greater extent than if you never practice joy and gratitude. I see this in grief counseling all the time. People who practice joy and gratitude as regular disciplines are far better able to weather bad times. During the bad times, they much more easily find and accept the comfort of God and the solace of friends.

Third point: To say that God’s will for us is to rejoice and give thanks is like saying God’s will for us is to love our neighbors as ourselves. As I’ve said before, when the Bible speaks of loving neighbor, it doesn’t mean a warm or romantic feeling, it means a willful and active concern for the other’s well-being. What I’m trying to say is that loving another person is acting in a way that contributes to *their* being able to rejoice and give thanks. That sentence is a little complicated, so I’ll say it again: Loving another person is acting in a way that contributes to their being able to rejoice and give thanks.

Fourth and final point: Through an accident of the English language, the word “rejoice” begins with the “re-“ prefix, implying a repeated action. This is pure coincidence, but there’s a theological truth here. Re-joicing is a re-turn to something that’s already happened.

In the beginning, God created human beings for joy and thanks. Human beings from the beginning have tried to live another way, without joy and thanks. We often think we can find joy apart from thanks, apart from God, and we can’t. So we make ourselves, and we make others, unnecessarily miserable. When we come to ourselves and practice joy and thanks, we are, in a way, actually returning to Eden. We are returning to what God intended for human beings and for the rest of the universe at the very beginning of time. We are placing ourselves back in harmony with God’s plan. When this happens, the kingdom of heaven comes that much closer.

The approach of the kingdom of heaven is what this season of Advent is all about. As I said last week, Jesus and the kingdom of heaven will come whether we cooperate or not. Paul is letting us know God far prefers it when we do cooperate. And we are much happier and healthier when we cooperate with the will of God.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you...May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and ...

He will do this.