

1 Th 5:16-28
 11 December 2011
 3rd Sunday of Advent

“Rejoice Always”

There is an annual occurrence in the days after Thanksgiving. A certain song begins to appear in TV commercials. In the holly jolly verse of Andy Williams, here’s how it begins: “It’s the most wonderful time of the year / With the kids jingle belling / And everyone telling you ‘Be of good cheer’ / It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

He goes on to reinforce his case: “It’s the hap- happiest season of all / With those holiday greetings and gay happy meetings / When friends come to call / It’s the hap- happiest season of all.”

We are currently in the midst of those days that our friend Andy refers to as “the most wonderful time of the year.” However, I don’t think he’s singing about Advent. And I’m quite certain that the **last** thing those commercials want to encourage is a sense of awareness, a sense of expectancy, a sense of watchfulness. No, those commercials want us to sleepwalk through the stores, pile up mountains of debt, and use the earth’s resources by purchasing tons of things.

A line from the song I find **especially** interesting is when he sings, “And everyone telling you ‘Be of good cheer.’” It sounds like a state of being that can be commanded. Just flip a switch, and lo and behold, you’re cheerful! I direct you to be happy. Let’s turn that frown upside down. It looks like we could be told to have emotions that are warm and fuzzy.

Today’s epistle reading begins, “Rejoice always” (v. 16). The Good News Bible says, “Be joyful always.” It might be argued that the apostle Paul is doing the same thing. Even if you’re sick as a dog—even if your heart is heavy—even if you’re dying from embarrassment and want to hide from the world, let’s put a smile on that face!

Our passage comes at the end of 1 Thessalonians. It is a series of final instructions to the church in Thessalonica, the major city in Macedonia. “Rejoice always” is followed by Paul’s direction to “pray without ceasing, [and to] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (vv. 17-18).

Always rejoice; always pray; always give thanks. Just like that! Some might say that the apostle is being dismissive of the people’s everyday reality.

If **it is** a matter of emotion, following the example of our song, being “of good cheer” in “the hap- happiest season of all,” then maybe **he is** being dismissive. Maybe **he is** being emotionally tone deaf. And maybe we **also** do that, if we (ever so slightly) criticize people for having certain feelings—feelings that we think they shouldn’t have, or that we don’t want to deal with.

But I think there’s more to it than that. I don’t think the apostle Paul is quite that shallow.

I’ll start by asking, “What does it mean to rejoice?” Are we talking about an emotion? Are we talking about a matter of feeling good, even feeling wonderful? It’s safe to say rejoicing **includes** feelings, but we can’t ignore the second half of verse 18. After telling the Thessalonians to always rejoice, always pray, and always give thanks,

Paul adds “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” He doesn’t leave it at the level of emotion. There’s something more.

Eugene Peterson is a retired Presbyterian minister who has written tons of books and has produced the paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*. He tells a story of joy (some would say, the lack thereof), during a worship service at a church he was visiting.¹

“In church last Sunday,” he begins, “there was a couple in front of us with two bratty kids. Two pews behind us there was another couple with their two bratty kids making a lot of noise. This is mostly an older congregation. So these people are set in their ways. Their kids have been gone a long time. And so [saying what a lot of people might think] it wasn’t a very nice service; it was just not very good worship. But afterwards I saw half a dozen of these elderly people come up and put their arms around the mother, touch the kids, sympathize with her. They could have been irritated.

“Now why do people go to a church like that when they can go to a church that has a nursery, is air conditioned, and all the rest? Well, because they’re Lutherans. They don’t mind being miserable! Norwegian Lutherans!

“And this same church recently welcomed a young woman with a baby and a three-year-old boy. The children were baptized a few weeks ago. But there was no man with her. [She was] never married; each of the kids has a different father. She shows up at church and wants her children baptized. She’s a Christian and wants to follow in the Christian way. So a couple from the church acted as godparents. Now there are three or four couples in the church who every Sunday try to get together with her.

“Now, where is the ‘joy’ in that church? These are [stern] Norwegians! But there’s a lot of joy. There’s an abundant life going, but it’s not abundant in the way a non-Christian would think. I think there’s a lot more going on in churches like this; they’re just totally anticultural. They’re full of joy and faithfulness and obedience and care. But you sure wouldn’t know it by reading the literature of church growth.”

We’re dealing with stuff that has real depth; it isn’t superficial or trivial. Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing” is in the same category.

One of the hallmarks of Reformed theology is that life is to be led *coram Deo*. In Latin, that means “before God.” It speaks to the awareness of being in the presence of God—of being before the face of God. As R. C. Sproul says, living “*coram Deo* is [living] a life of integrity. [Integrity is when everything is put together; it’s life in balance.] It is a life of wholeness that finds its unity and coherency in the majesty of God.”²

That is a life of praying without ceasing. It’s not a question of repeatedly saying or thinking prayers. When I went to the Assemblies of God college in Florida, I knew a guy who it seemed finished every other sentence by murmuring, “Praise God.” Maybe that was how he interpreted “praying without ceasing.” I thought there was something wrong with him mentally.

A fourth-century hermit, one of the desert Christians, used to say, “Ceaseless prayer soon heals the mind.”³ Far from being the sign of a nervous tic, praying without

¹ www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/march/26.42.html

² www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-coram-deo-mean

³ www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/92504.pdf

ceasing brings life and health. It opens one up to a life of gratitude, which is third on Paul's list.

He continues in rapid-fire succession with his instructions, which I'll briefly skim. Verse 19 says, "Do not quench the Spirit." Do not extinguish the inner flame. "Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (vv. 20-22). Listen to those who speak the word from God, but also test it. Don't be foolish; don't just fall for anything.

Right in the center of our scripture reading are verses 23 and 24. "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."

"The God of peace": why use that description? There are plenty of other names and titles of God to choose from. And why pray that the God of peace will "sanctify you entirely"? Let's see what's going on.

That word "entirely" in the Greek (ὁλοτελής, *holotelēs*) means "wholly completed." Paul's prayer is that his hearers be purified through and through. Revisiting our friend R. C. Sproul and his comments on *coram Deo* as being a life of wholeness, he speaks of the **other** option. "A fragmented life is a life of disintegration. It is marked by inconsistency, disharmony, confusion, conflict, contradiction, and chaos."⁴ That is the **opposite** of what the God of peace brings.

He gives an illustration. "The Christian who compartmentalizes his or her life into two sections of the religious and the nonreligious has failed to grasp the big idea. The big idea is that all of life is religious or none of life is religious. To divide life between the religious and the nonreligious is itself a sacrilege." Sproul uses the terms "religious" and "nonreligious"; we might also think of it as "sacred" and "secular."

The point is that when we are made holy—when we are made whole—in spirit and soul and body, then we are at peace. But remember, this isn't just about emotions! And in the same way, this isn't just about us as individuals. Paul is speaking to the community. This Word of God is for the community.

Our Old Testament reading is helpful (Is 61:1-4, 8-11). The prophet says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (v. 1).

Sometimes people chant, "No justice, no peace!" If there's no justice, there can be no peace. Here's another one: "No justice, no joy!"

Today is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday. There's some more Latin for you! It means "rejoice." We're in lectionary year B. Today's epistle reading begins with "Rejoice." Next year, the reading is from Philipians 4, where we hear, "Rejoice in the Lord always." The pink candle, which represents joy, comes from seeing Advent as a season of penitent reflection, preparing ourselves for the Lord. The third Sunday means we're almost there; let's have a joyful pause.

Some may think, "That's all well and good, but isn't that some empty liturgical nicety?" That takes us back to the question I asked earlier. What does it mean to rejoice? What if we don't **feel** like rejoicing? Remember, Paul and his friends had

⁴ www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-coram-deo-mean

plenty of hardships. Remember those stern Norwegians! There's a sense in which **insisting** on joy is a question of holy and loving defiance.

It's not about emotion; it's about choice. Verse 25 is well taken: "Beloved, pray for us." Pray for us!

How will we stay on that path of joy, prayer, and gratitude? It happens by the grace of God through Christ in the Spirit of a loving, caring community. (Or should I say: a rejoicing, praying, grateful community?) Christian life, by definition, cannot be lived alone.

We rejoice when we embrace. We rejoice when we laugh together. We rejoice when we weep. We rejoice when we come to the table. We rejoice when, in holy and loving defiance, we proclaim God's peaceable kingdom in the midst of an anxious and fearful world. Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice always.