

Pastor Bill Sass - Sermon for October 11, 2020

“I SAY, REJOICE!”

Philippians 4:1-9

“From silly devotions, and sour faced saints,” prayed St. Teresa, “good Lord deliver us.” Our subject today is joy. I thought we might begin with a little church humor:

A pastor caught three small children stealing oranges from his tree. “Do you know what the Bible says about thieves?” He asked. “Yes, sir!” one answered. “Today you will be with me in paradise!”

A florist’s new assistant took a telephone order from a customer. “The ribbon must be white,” said the woman on the phone, “with gold letters reading, ‘Rest in peace’ on both sides. And if you can squeeze it in, ‘We shall meet in heaven.’”

When the floral tribute arrived at the home of the deceased, the beautiful flowers were adorned with a white ribbon with gold letters that proclaimed, “Rest in peace on both sides! If you can squeeze in, we shall meet in heaven!”

And, finally, how about this bulletin blooper? “The angels rejoice when one singer repents!” None of our singers need to repent for their singing.

St. Paul writes to the church in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (NIV) Have you ever thought of joy as a command? “Rejoice in the Lord.” What a splendid attitude to bring into worship. Rejoice, you’re in God’s house now. It’s time to lay aside your worries, lay aside your heartaches, be done with your resentments, dry your tears, forget about your hurts. Focus on Christ, and rejoice. Easier said than done, perhaps, but that is God’s will for us today. Rejoice.

These words were written by a man who somehow learned to put life into perspective. Paul knew better than any of us that life can be difficult. He had been beaten for his faith, shipwrecked, imprisoned. But he knew that Christ is greater than any adversary, any painful emotion, any remembered hurt. He is rejoicing because of a Positive Mental Attitude. He is rejoicing because he’s O.K., and we’re O.K. **He’s rejoicing because he knows that God is in control.** It’s not just any kind of cheerful good mood. He is rejoicing in the Lord.

We see that in his next words. He writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all...” That’s a strange progression of thoughts. What has gentleness got to do with rejoicing? Scholars tell us Paul is using an interesting ancient Greek word (epieikeia) that is translated gentleness here. Other translations of the

Bible translate *epieikeia* as patience, softness, modesty, forbearance, magnanimity. It is not the gentleness that comes from weakness, but from an internal source of strength.

This is the Pauline version, says one scholar, of 1 Peter 2:23, which says of Christ: “when they hurled their insults at Him. He did not retaliate, when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, he entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.”

Have you heard it is not what happens to us that matters in life, but how we react to what happens to us? For example, we say, “You make me so angry.” The truth is that you don’t have the power to make me angry. I make myself angry in response to what you have done. Paul is saying that we cannot allow our external environment to determine our internal joy.

How do you rejoice when people are hurling insults at you, and you are suffering physical abuse? To do that, you have to see the big picture. You have to be focused on more than the hardship of the moment.

In 1945, Branch Rickey, President of the Brooklyn Dodgers, made the radical decision to integrate the sport of professional baseball by recruiting a talented African-American player named Jackie Robinson. Robinson’s athletic skills were outstanding. But Rickey knew this young man would need more than great skills to make it, in the all-white major leagues. He needed strength of character to stand up to the racism and abuse he would face from other players, fans, even from his own teammates. To show him what he could expect, Branch Rickey began to act out the various racist behavior that Robinson would endure. He acted the part of rude hotel clerks, apathetic waiters, violent teammates, racist fans.

All this time, Jackie Robinson stood tall and refused to respond. When the demonstration was over, Branch Rickey handed Jackie Robinson a book titled *Life of Christ* by Giovanni Papini. Rickey turned to a passage about Jesus’ most “revolutionary” teaching, according to Papini: Matthew 5:38-42 (also found in Luke 6:27-31) about loving one’s enemies, and turning the other cheek. Jackie Robinson took these words to heart. He made it to the major leagues, where he became legendary for his athletic skills, and integrity in the face of prejudice. President Bush awarded the Congressional God Medal to Rachel Robinson, Jackie’s widow, for her husband’s bravery and character, in changing the face of professional sports in this country.

How do you maintain grace in the face of provocation? In the same way you maintain joy in the midst of grief. You keep your eye fixed on the big picture. God is in control. No adversary can defeat Christ. He is the reason we rejoice. In a hospital bed, we can rejoice. By a grave side, we can rejoice. During the breakup of a marriage, we can rejoice. We are in God’s hands. Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all.” Now notice what Paul says next, “The Lord is near. Do not be

anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

The second necessity for rejoicing is an attitude of gratitude. For the follower of Christ, thanksgiving is not a response to momentary circumstances, but to the eternal gift of God’s love. There is a quaint old short story, probably written in the early 1900’s, titled “His First Step.” This story chronicles the trials of a seven-year-old boy named Tucker. Tucker has spent the last two years of his life hospitalized for severe leg injuries after a horseback riding accident. One of Tucker’s greatest joys is seeing his father, Jim, on visiting day. Sadly, the other children notice that Tucker doesn’t have a mother. They remind him of this fact. One child thoughtlessly remarks that even if Tucker’s father Jim marries again, Tucker will never have a real mother, because a real mother shares the same blood as her child.

At night, Tucker prays for a mother to love him the way he had seen other mothers love their children. His greatest comfort, besides his father, is Nurse Lacey, who fusses over Tucker just like he was her own. One night, Tucker suffers a serious fall while trying to take his first steps after his long recovery. When he awakes, his father gives him good news. He tells him that he has decided to marry Nurse Lacey, the gentle nurse who has taken such good care of him. As Tucker reaches to hug Nurse Lacey, he notices a small white bandage on her arm, the same as the one on his arm. Nurse Lacey tells Tucker that he lost a lot of blood in the fall, and it was fortunate that she shared his same blood type. She had given him a transfusion of her own blood in order to save his life. And little Tucker thanked God for answering his prayers, and giving him a real mother, one who shared his own blood.

In the same way that Tucker was grateful for a mother who shared his blood, St. Paul was grateful that we have a “blood brother” in Christ. It is faith in Christ, and His sacrifice upon the cross, that is the foundation for all thanksgiving. We need to understand this. Otherwise, we fall into a familiar trap. Things are going our way, and we say, “God has really blessed me. I am so thankful.” But what do we do, when life does not go our way? Are we relieved of thanksgiving? Should we scream at God for letting us down? If we do, we are revealing a very human but also very immature faith.

Like our joy, gratitude for the follower of Christ is not based in our external circumstances, but in our knowledge of God’s love for us. God is in control. So prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. We are grateful because we know God can handle any situation, and God loves us totally, completely, everlastingly.

There’s one thing more we need to see from this text. **Notice this message was written to a church.** It could have been written to an individual, but it was written to a community of faith. This, too, is important.

Christians rejoice because God is in control, Christians rejoice because Christ's cross shows us God's heart, but Christians also rejoice because we are part of Christ's body.

Someone has said, "Misery loves company, but joy requires it." What a beautiful insight. "Misery loves company, but joy requires it." Joy requires company, community, connectedness. Think about those really happy moments in your life. Those moments that make you feel almost giddy just thinking about them. Were you alone, or did you share that event with someone else? To experience joy, we almost have to be in the company of at least one other person. That's why worship is so satisfying to our souls. That is why serving others can be a joyous experience. Anytime we move out of ourselves, and connect with another human being, in the name of Christ, joy is possible.

We're talking about joy, real joy, lasting joy. We can go to an amusement park, and be happy for a little while, but when we come home, we sink back into our feeling of melancholy, our feeling that somehow, we've missed the meaning of it all. For joy to be real, we need to share it with someone else. When St. Paul says to us, "Rejoice," he is not talking about a temporary happy fix that is passing. He's talking about joy that is lasting, and all-pervading. It comes from our belief that God is in control of the world, our gratitude for what Christ Jesus has done in our behalf, and for our participation in the family of Christ. So no silly devotions, or sour faces, please. We are called to rejoice in the Lord.

AMEN!