

“I SAY, REJOICE!”

Exodus 32:1-14 Philippians 4: 1-9

St. Teresa is reported to have prayed, “From silly devotions and sour faced saints, good Lord deliver us.” Let’s make a deal: I will try not to make this sermon a “silly devotion” if you will not look at me with a sour face.

Let’s start with a good party. I mean, EVERYBODY loves a good party, right? We may not all agree on what constitutes a good party, but we still like them. Provide food and fun and people will be there. The very words, “You’re invited” have a special ring to them.

Paul writes to the church in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” 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, and 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 not rejoicing because of a Positive Mental Attitude. He is not 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?

A bit of study quickly tells us that Paul is using an interesting ancient Greek word (*epieikeia*) that is translated as “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 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 said that 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.

If anyone had a good reason to be angry, it should have been Moses. Think about today’s scripture...the man spends his adult life leading a reluctant and ungrateful people to a new life and new relationship with God. They get bored of waiting for the Promised Land and so, while Moses is out of sight, start their own party. They make an idol, a golden calf, and then “they rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being ... and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel”. Tired of waiting on God, no problems...we’ll make our own, and our god likes to party!

Of course, WE would never do anything like make our own god, would we?

And if that’s not enough, this same Moses...the who man spends his adult life leading a reluctant and ungrateful people to a new life and new relationship with God ...finds out, once that promised land, that new life is in sight, he will never be allowed in and dies on the spot. A reason to be angry? You bet!

Life gets that way sometimes... So we jog or run or bike or meditate or do something to help us ignore the hurts.

Still, how do you rejoice when people are hurling insults at you and you are suffering physical abuse? That’s a very real question for both Moses and Paul and, in many ways, for us as well. To do that, you have to see the big picture. You have to be focused on more than the hardship of the moment.

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 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 realized that God had answered 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, 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 the burden 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. That is why Paul writes, “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by 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 that 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 they are part of Christ's body.

A man had been out of church for some time. While his pastor talked to him about this, he walked over to the fireplace and pulled a log from the fire. Together they watched as the log gradually cooled until it no longer glowed at all. "That is what happens to us," said the pastor, "when we are away from the community of faith."

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? We can have many satisfying experiences by ourselves, but to experience joy we almost must 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 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.

This is the very real joy that only comes when we rejoice. 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.

It's the only way we'll find joy in our lives.