

## Sermon 12-13-09 Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18

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### Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

### Luke 3:7-18

7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." 10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

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Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS, and again I will say, rejoice.

There was a college professor making a point in class that every life is truly incredible. Underneath the surface of everyone's life there is an incredible drama unfolding. A few of his students were challenging him on this point, so he opened the door and told them to go find someone, for whom this isn't true. Well as it happened, when he opened the door a newspaper delivery boy was walking by. And a student said, I bet he's pretty ordinary. The professor stopped the boy, and asked him if he had a few minutes and could he interview him in front of the class.

They found out that the boy was originally from India, but he couldn't really think of anything out of the ordinary about himself. Then, the professor said to him that he couldn't help but notice that the whole time that they had been talking, he had been smiling. Are you always so happy? The boy responded that back in India he was born with a cleft palate. When they did surgery to correct it, something went wrong, resulting in a permanent smile on his face. Then the boy said, "Can you imagine what it's like to want to let others know that you're sad, when you can't stop smiling?"

I think the professor won that debate.

And I also don't think that Paul meant for the people to plant a permanent smile on their face when he tells them to "Rejoice in the Lord always." But what does he mean?

This is one of Paul's final exhortations to the church in Phillippi, as he wraps up his letter of love and encouragement to them, and I do believe that Paul wasn't telling them to just focus on the sunny side of life and ignore their hardships, grief and struggle. It might be helpful for us to keep in mind that Paul was writing this letter from prison. Acts 16 records the story of how Paul and Silas years earlier in Phillippi had been arrested, flogged, and put in prison with their feet in stocks. There in the depths of this terrible predicament they began to sing hymns to God. What were they thinking? Where were they coming from? I think that Paul's encouragement to rejoice always was his way of pointing them to a deeper reality. Rejoice in the LORD, always.

No matter what happens, there is a reason to rejoice. We can rejoice because the Lord is near.

Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly once suggested that the popular painting of Jesus knocking at the door should be an interior door in the house rather than an exterior one, for the Lord is already inside each and every one of us. Rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is near. Becoming aware of the Lord's presence is the essence of prayer. To live each moment in this awareness is to pray without ceasing and cause for rejoicing, no matter what.

One of you shared with me this week about a sign in your bathroom that says, "Why pray, when you can worry and fret." What a wonderful reminder. It serves as a more concise paraphrase of Paul's admonition to the Phillipians, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

*slowly*

Prayer brings a peace that transcends understanding. It's beyond our thoughts, beneath our thinking mind. Joseph Bernardin notes that, "Inner peace is a great gift. When we are at peace, we find the freedom to be ourselves, even in difficult times. We let go of what is unnecessary and embrace what really matters."

*Pause -slowly*

I think what Bernardin was describing was what Paul calls the peace that passes all understanding, as was Thomas Kelly when he penned these lines, "Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is serene and radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time, making our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. Love is at the helm. And when our little day is done, we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well."

It's from this deep place of peace that Paul's admonition to rejoice always can start to make some sense. In the midst of whatever difficulty or challenge. Even when we're bereaved, despairing or distraught, when we're in the Lord, and sense God's power, presence and peace, this itself is reason for rejoicing. Paul's encouraging them and us to live out of paradox, to live in the land of 'AND': joy AND sorrow, saint AND sinner, broken AND whole, gifted AND flawed, forgotten AND remembered, transgressing AND forgiven, dead AND alive, anxious AND at peace.

Paul was encouraging the Phillipians to become a congregation so in love with God and one another that they couldn't help but to rejoice always. It's not an outward permanent smile, but an inner one that persists even when the darkness of our world presses down and closes in.

This week and next will be the darkest two weeks of the year, as a week from Monday is the winter solstice. During Advent we light candles to shine light into the darkness, and to remind us of the great joy of God's love that undergirds our whole lives, no matter what.

As Benjamin Reaves points out, our rejoicing is IN all things not FOR all things: Now, make no mistake and let me hasten to add that even Paul did not rejoice in the Lord FOR all circumstances. Rather, we are to rejoice or give thanks IN all circumstances. For instance, we don't rejoice for death or for pain or for divorce or for cancer. But, by the grace of God, it is given us to rejoice in or during or after these difficult and painful circumstances. Not joy because of, but joy in spite of.

Joy like that of the devoted Christian woman undergoing chemotherapy who was told by a friend, "Under the circumstances, I don't see how you can be so cheerful." She responded not in pious bravado but in deep personal conviction. "I'm not under any circumstances. Because of Jesus, I'm on top of the circumstances!" Now there's a woman who's heart and mind flow out of the peace that passes all understanding.

On the other hand, John the Baptist, should be issued a citation this morning for disturbing the peace. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." John's metaphors resound with judgment, an axe ready to cut down the fruitless tree and burn it, and of the one who's coming with winnowing fork in hand and a baptism of fire. These are disturbing images, which at the end of our passage, Luke labels, 'good news.'

Another surprising thing here is the people's response to John's metaphors of judgment. They don't turn away in anger or become defensiveness, but simply ask, "What shall we do?" John's responses remind me of that popular book from a few years ago, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Share. Do the right thing. Don't cheat. Don't bully. Note that he didn't tell the tax collectors and soldiers to quit being soldiers and tax collectors, even though many thought that those in such professions were colluding with an oppressive empire. Rather, he tells them to conduct they're affairs differently from the usually cheating among tax collectors, and the usual extortion tactics of the military. Likewise, God wants us to bear good fruit wherever we've been planted.

Recently a bishop who had begun a hostel for AIDS victims was asked why money was spent to care for such people, many of whom who were not Christian. He responded that we do not help suffering and oppressed people because they are Christians, but because we are.

The good news for us today is that our Lord is near with winnowing fork in hand, separating the wheat from the chaff of our lives, so that our lives do bear fruit. We can experience God's undergirding peace in challenging times. We can pray, rather than worry and fret. We can be grateful for God's bounty in all circumstances. We really can as Paul suggests, "Rejoice in the Lord, ALWAYS." For God is near and God is here...in this place, and in our hearts creating deep down in a place that passes all understanding a never ending, internal smile.