

Joy, Prayer, and Thanksgiving

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 14, 2008

I.

We just heard the second Gospel reading in two weeks about John the Baptist. It's an important story that speaks once again of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The New Testament lesson from First Thessalonians also is essential to our faith, and is a central part of Jesus' teachings. And because my sermon last week was about John's work, I would like to talk today about this other New Testament message and its relationship to the tradition of the day.

This is the third Sunday in Advent, which was known in medieval times as *Gaudete* Sunday. It still is referred to in that way in the Roman Catholic church and many Episcopal churches with Anglo-catholic traditions. On this day clergy in those churches may wear rose colored vestments, which signifies the continuing transition from penitence to joy during this Advent season.

And we have our own rose colored candle, which is lit today for the first time. This reflects the Latin meaning of *Gaudete*, which is an instruction to rejoice. We also should note that "rejoice" is the first word in our reading from First Thessalonians.

Let's read this short passage one more time. It's on page seven of the service bulletin, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. 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."

Isn't that a wonderful passage? It virtually overflows with encouragement, hope, and assurance. And when we encounter our own problems and difficulties, Paul's words call us to look for the spiritual silver linings inside the dark clouds of life; to search out what is good and godly in a broken and unjust world. And through faith we are assured that we will find these blessings.

On the lighter side of things this passage reminds me of the story about several elderly people at a nursing home sitting around and discussing their ailments:

One of them said, "My arms are so weak I can hardly lift this coffee cup." Another said, "My cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee." A third complained, "I can't turn my head because of my arthritis," and another said "My blood pressure pills really make me dizzy." Someone else seemed to sum it all up when he said, "That's the price we pay for getting old."

There was general agreement, and then one of them broke into a big smile and cheerfully said, "Well, it's not really that bad, thank God we all can still drive!"

They all found reason to rejoice and give thanks amid their difficulties, didn't they? We might be concerned if we saw one of them behind the wheel. But their optimism parallels one of the basic points in this reading. It is that the joy and thanksgiving we are called to feel and express, and the prayers we are asked to offer, are not products of our own changing circumstances, but are based upon what Christ has done for us. And it is always and everlasting.

II.

As we study this passage from Thessalonians, I would like to ask a question. Have you watched some of these action movies where the heroes and heroines always manage to escape from the villains while trapped in the middle of danger and violence? People crash through windows and run away unharmed, fall off tall buildings and jump right up, survive spectacular car wrecks, and

emerge unscratched though all sorts of perils, chaos, and havoc. The recent Indiana Jones movie is a good example.

How do they do it? How do these people in the movies avoid death or injury in situations that most likely would be fatal or close to it in real life? The answer is: it's in the script! Read the script and you can know what's going to happen. Read the script and you will understand that all of those miraculous escapes were intended and designed from the very beginning.

Today's reading is the same. It's part of the script that governs our lives in faith. That script is the Bible, and it's real, not Hollywood. That script can get us through difficult situations, and Paul's inspired words to the church and people at Thessalonica offer especially good guidance. When we read that sacred script and take it seriously, we encounter some of the basic truths of living a Christian life. This is one of those passages you want to mark in your Bible.

III.

The reading, and the truth it proclaims, has three parts. In summary, the first calls us to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances. The second says that we should not quench the Spirit, which means we should use the gifts God has given us. It also warns us of false prophets, and we only have to watch TV and read the newspapers to know who they are. The third part of the reading tells us that God wants us to be worthy of salvation.

What did Paul mean when he said these things? Can we always be joyful? How do we feel when we get a bad medical diagnosis? Where is the joy in that? And if we literally prayed without ceasing how could we effectively do other things? Finally, if we give thanks in all possible circumstances wouldn't that suggest that every circumstance in which we find ourselves is what we want? Can we do what Paul says if we are realists?

Well, Paul also was a realist. He did not expect people to apply his words in rigid and strict ways that produced absurd results. Let's look at the three parts of the reading in more detail.

In the first part Paul spoke of a continuing attitude of inward joy, prayer, and thanksgiving flowing from what God has done in Christ, and has offered to all who believe. That's what he meant by "Rejoice always." He wanted people to know that our Christian hope in salvation does not change because of worldly circumstances. It comes from God and is constant.

And when he referred to unceasing prayer he described a relationship of communication with God based on the content of our hearts, which always is known to the Holy Spirit. He did not expect that we would continually use mechanical repetitious prayer-like formulas. He also believed that our very lives are our prayer, and therefore we always are in contact with God. But we should not just think of passive ways to talk to God. We also are called to intentionally pray regularly during the week and with each other in church.

Finally, Paul understood that we cannot literally be thankful all the time for all the consequences of living in this broken world. But we always can hold a sense of thankfulness in our minds for the gift of life we received from God. Paul's words also call us to give thanks at all times for the Christian hope of the world to come. And each of us knows the particular blessings and gifts God has given us, and we can continually be thankful for them.

The second part of the reading deals with our interactions with others. Paul recognized that we are given gifts through the Holy Spirit, and that these gifts are not for our benefit alone. We also are called to use them to build up the Christian community. Those who quench or suppress their gifts prevent others from sharing them, which is contrary to the second Great Commandment to love our neighbors.

And the problem of false prophets always has been with us. An example is the current *Newsweek* magazine, which makes the spurious claim that the Bible supports gay marriage. Contemporary society bombards us with these misleading ideas, and Paul would have us test them against that script I referred to earlier. We are called to look to the Bible as revealed to us through the Holy Spirit, and not as interpreted by journalists with their own agendas.

And finally, Paul reassured the Thessalonians that as they rejoiced, prayed, gave thanks, and used their God-given talents to further God's kingdom, God would be with them. God would sanctify them that they might be prepared and ready when the Lord returns again. This promise applies to us today with equal force.

IV.

And how do we claim that promise? One of the classic stories this time of year is Charles Dickens', *A Christmas Carol*, and its portrayal of Ebenezer Scrooge as a greedy, self-centered, unforgiving person who was transformed through otherworldly and prophetic visions of his fate.

Ebenezer obviously had not read First Thessalonians, had he? What's the well-known quote attributed to him? "Bah, humbug," isn't it? That's just the opposite of today's reading that tells us to "Rejoice." Even Scrooge's last name has crept into our vocabulary as synonymous with miserliness and meanness. This obviously was not someone who rejoiced always, and gave thanksgiving in all circumstances.

And that's how the story begins. But we also know how the story ends. Through visits from three supernatural Christmas ghosts; past, present, and future, old Ebenezer became a new man. He did rejoice and give thanks, and he did use his gifts for good. If Dickens had written St. Paul into the story he probably would have praised old Scrooge for his selflessness and humanity.

But although Dickens' story is not outwardly based on the Bible, it might well have drawn on biblical teachings. Its ending echoes the themes of today's reading from First Thessalonians. Scrooge started out as a selfish skeptic, and ended up as a compassionate convert.

So, rejoice, pray, and give thanks. Let us use our skills and abilities to help others. Disregard those who scoff at the Bible or twist its words to suit their own purposes. And believe always that the Lord Jesus Christ will strengthen you in your faith and bring you to eternal life with him. This is the formula for Christian living. It tells us, as it told the Thessalonians long ago, how to do God's will in a world that frequently treats God as a stranger.

V.

There is one final point, implicit in this reading, that also should be made. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, as was the case with many of his letters, was written to the church. In addition to preaching the Gospel, Paul also started new churches as he traveled about on his missionary journeys. And he followed up with them by sending letters offering instructions and advice.

And so we read this passage from First Thessalonians not only as guidance we can take to heart personally, but also as model for our common life here at St. Thomas. We want to grow and reach into the community. And we want to care for the people within our own walls. This reading gives guidance for our own lives as it also tells us how to be in Christian fellowship with others.

I believe we are a joyful church, a praying church, and a thankful church that relies on the Bible and follows the Holy Spirit. As we express those attitudes and actions through our own lives and through the church, we will be doing what Paul asked the Thessalonians to do, and we truly will be loving God and our neighbor. *Amen.*