

December 14, 2003  
Third Sunday of Advent  
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## Rejoice Always

Philippians 4:4-7 *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 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.*

### Turning Toward the Light

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of Joy. Traditionally it is a pink or rose-colored candle, a bright contrast to the candles that have come before it. The symbolism is understood when we remember that Advent was, in centuries past, a season of repentance and self-examination. The lighting of the candle of joy is a call to get up, dust ourselves off, and look with joy and expectation to the coming of God's love and word in Christ. There is a time for self-examination, and there is a time to rise up and receive our new life as a gift from God. There is a time to acknowledge our own and the world's sin, and there is a time to receive forgiveness and respond to the call to a different way of living. John the Baptist's call to repentance now recedes as we bend toward the light of God in Christ, toward the new life filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our reading today from Paul's Philippian letter speaks of this new life, its character, and its spiritual shape.

### Constant Joy

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Here is a call to constant joy. But how can Paul ask us to do that? Doesn't he know what life is really like? This call to be joyful all the time sounds unrealistic. However, Paul's words aren't trivial or Pollyanna. He's writing from a prison cell. He's put everything on the line for the sake of Christ and the Good News. He has suffered every physical and spiritual hurt the world offers. Shipwrecks. Imprisonments. The pain of seeing the Christian communities he tried so hard to nurture collapse into infighting, losing the big picture, the purpose, the goal. I wonder if Paul ever knew the pain of discouragement, of thinking that maybe it's not worth it, that maybe it is all just a wish-dream that cannot come true in the real world.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!" These are not the words of a religious sentimentalist, sitting at his desk by the fire, sipping tea, and writing cheery words. These words come out of life as it really is. But they also come from one who is deeply convinced of God's work and presence in Christ. We can discover this kind of joy as we live fully within life's realities, not avoiding them, but meeting them as those who know Christ and his love, who know God and God's power to redeem the world. It is the deep, unshakable joy found as we discover at the foundation of life God and God's power of new life. It is a joy we see sometimes in those persons who have gone or are going through tremendous suffering, yet have in them little or no bitterness, anger, or despair. They are not better or stronger people. It's just that they have touched within themselves and life itself a core of goodness, love, and hope.

Are we joyful people? Are we a joyful community? I don't mean going around with smiles on our faces all the time. Having joy in our hearts and souls does not mean always feeling light-hearted. But it does mean that, at least most of the time, we are in touch with God's deep, abiding, steadfast, and insurmountable care for us and the world. Rejoicing always arises from our knowing that the greatest and deepest truth about life is that compassion will overcome indifference, peaceableness will overcome violence, and generosity will overcome greed, that beyond hate and prejudice lies reconciliation.

### The Power of Gentleness

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Gentleness means having a kind and yielding spirit, a spirit that makes room for others. This kind of gentleness comes from our knowing Christ, his love and compassion. We never read a story of Jesus trying to control others, brow-beating them into faith and obedience. A wealthy man came to Jesus seeking eternal life (Mark 10). After seeing that the man knew well the two most important commandments—love of God and love of neighbor—Jesus told him he lacked one thing. He needed to sell all he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow Jesus. The man's heart sank. He couldn't do it. Did Jesus berate him or condemn him? No. The text says that Jesus looked on him with love. He let him go. Only out of freedom could the man respond to Jesus. He wasn't ready for it. This is the kind of gentleness Paul is talking about. It knows what is true and is not afraid to speak the truth. But it doesn't roll up its sleeves and use force.

Our gentleness, like our joy, has the same source—God's sovereignty over life that, sooner or later, will triumph. In the meantime, we live our lives based on that hope, that knowledge, that promise. We don't have to adopt the ways of the world, the kind of power that coerces, threatens, or instills fear. The power of gentleness, of yielding, is the kind of power that Gandhi knew, which he recognized in Jesus. He called it *ahimsa*, the power of non-injuring, the power of goodness and love. It is the power that comes from God. This kind of power shows itself in the gentleness Paul calls us to have and to show toward everyone.

### Letting Go of Worry

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Do not worry (*merimnate*) means not having anxiety, not being unduly concerned. It doesn't mean being unconcerned about others or the world. It means not letting our right concern turn into anxious brooding. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life," taught Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Contemplate the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. Get in touch with the creation and learn how to live the simple, carefree, trusting life.

How hard it is for us to refrain from worrying! But our worrying is based on the illusion that we are in control of other people, of life itself. Worry is a form of trying to be God. I come from a great family of worriers! Was someone in the family depressed? You worry. Was someone going through a divorce? You worry. Was someone having a perfectly normal life adjustment or crisis? You worry. What did all this worrying accomplish? Nothing positive. But it also did something else. Worrying about someone in this way gives the message that they are powerless, that they don't have it in themselves to find their own answers, their own way, their own strengths.

"Do not worry about anything," says Paul. Anxiety is a form of faithlessness. It assumes that God is powerless, and it assumes that we have more power than we really

do. What is Paul's antidote? "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Prayer. Supplication. Lifting things up to God. And wrapping it all in thanksgiving. Lifting all our concerns, our worries, all the anxiousness in our minds and hearts, up to God. And letting them go.

No, it isn't easy. It's very hard, especially because we do care so much about others and about the world. But working with this letting go is an important part of our spiritual journey. It is sorting out what we can and can't do, what we are able to change and what we can't change, who we might be able to help and who needs to be simply held in love and care. For many of us, overcoming our tendency toward worry and anxiousness means finally coming to that point where we see clearly that our worry simply doesn't do anyone any good. Then we can begin to let go of that useless burden and use the resulting spiritual energy to do all the good we are capable of doing for others.

### The Nearness of God/Christ

I skipped over these words: "The Lord is near." These four words seem to be the axis of the whole passage. The nearness of God, the nearness of Christ, seems to press in on Paul. And it is this "pressure" of God and God's power that accounts for the kind of spirit Paul is calling for. Is the nearness of the Lord a matter of time? Is Paul talking about WHEN God is going to fulfill the kingdom, WHEN Christ is going to return in glory? Maybe. The earliest Christians believed strongly that the end was indeed near, that they would see Christ return triumphantly, and God's kingdom would come in their lifetime.

We shouldn't dismiss this hope, even though the expectation of the early church was disappointed. God's reign, God's realm is ALWAYS near, always ready to break forth into our lives and the life of our world. And doesn't that nearness of God, of Christ, break into life whenever we live so that our very own lives are the gates thrown open to God's kingdom? Maybe the nearness of God's ultimate healing of all life is not so much a matter of WHEN as it is a matter of THAT...that God's ways will ultimately prevail, that peace will ultimately triumph over war, that the well-being of all people will be established over the injustices that rob the majority of the world's people of well-being. Christian hope is grounded in what is ultimately true and powerful, and the confidence that these things will always be assured.

The nearness of God's reign stands behind every word of Paul's. The constant, gentle, steadfast pressure of God's will and purposes instills hope and confidence. The kind of life Paul is commending—joy, gentleness, lack of anxiety—is shaped by this constant nearness of God, of Christ.

### The Peace of God

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." As we work with all Paul has just said, we will find growing in us an unshakable peace that comes from God. This deep, abiding peace is not the result of an escape from life, from the world, but is found in the midst of life as we give ourselves to following Christ and doing what he calls us to do for the sake of the world. It is a peace that we cannot understand and can hardly describe in words. It is the mystery and gift that comes to us and in us as we touch the nearness of God, as we our hearts are sensitive to Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us.