

December 16, 2012 / Third Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

Rejoice Always

Philippians 4:4-7(8-9) *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.*

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, and we light the candle of joy, a pink or rose-colored candle, in contrast to the purple candles that have come before it. The symbolism is clear 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 joyful expectation toward the coming of God's love and word in Jesus, and a rebirth of the gospel in our lives. There is a time for self-examination, and there is a time to 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 move on, to live with joy and freedom the life to which Jesus calls us. In response to the terrible killings in Connecticut, and so many other gun killings in our society, the joy can come as we wake up to what we must and can do to end violence in our nation and world. It is the joy of a call answered, an action taken, a mind made up in harmony with the teachings of Jesus. This Sunday tells us it is time to turn toward the light.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. How can Paul ask us to have constant joy? Doesn't he know what life is really like? Paul's words aren't naive. He's writing from a prison cell. He has put everything on the line for the sake of Jesus and the good news of God's love. He has suffered physically and spiritually. Shipwrecks. Imprisonments. Floggings. The pain of seeing some of the communities he loved collapse into infighting and ego-centeredness, losing the purpose, the goal, the essence of who they are.

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, lived by one who is deeply convinced of God's work and presence in Jesus and the life to which he calls us. We can touch this kind of joy as we live fully within life's realities as those who know that at the foundation of life is God's power of new life. It is a joy we see sometimes in persons who have known tremendous suffering, yet have in them little or no bitterness, anger, or despair. They have touched within themselves a core of goodness, love, and hope that has made their hearts larger, not smaller.

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. Joy has to do with growing in our awareness of God's deep, abiding, steadfast, and insurmountable care for us and the world. Rejoicing always arises from knowing, not just in our heads but in our innermost being, that compassion will overcome indifference, peaceableness will overtake violence, generosity will triumph over greed, love will wash away hate and prejudice, all because that is the truest, deepest nature of life as God created it. Joy, you see, is not a matter of emotions or sentiments, which rise and fall with circumstances. Joy is a condition of our souls.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Here gentleness means having a spirit that makes room for others. It comes from our knowing the spirit of Jesus, which is our true human spirit. 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 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, and he wasn't ready. This is the kind of gentleness Paul is talking about. It knows what is true and is not afraid to speak the truth, but does not roll up its sleeves and use force.

Our gentleness, like our joy, has the same source—awareness of God's sovereignty over life that, sooner or later, will triumph. In the meantime, we live our lives based on that hope, that promise. We don't have to adopt the ways of the world, the kind of power that coerces, threatens, or manipulates. The power of gentleness, of yielding, is the kind of power that Gandhi knew, which he recognized also in Jesus. He called it *ahimsa*, the power of truth and love lived out without harming, without injuring. It is the power that comes from God. This kind of power shows itself in the gentleness Paul calls us to have toward others, and, I think, also ourselves.

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 does not 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. They are our teachers. Get in touch with the rest of creation and learn how to live the simple, carefree, trusting life.

How hard it is for us to keep 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 depressed? You worry. Was someone going through a divorce? You

worry. Was someone having some kind of crisis? You worry. What did all this worrying accomplish? Nothing. But it does do 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. Worrying about someone can be just as debilitating as feeling sorry for them!

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. And then letting go.

No, it isn't easy. It's very hard, especially because we do care so much about others and about the world. Yet 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 loving mindfulness, and also discerning the right ways of helping. As we let go of the useless burden of worry and anxiousness, we can use the resulting spiritual energy to do the good we are able to do for others.

I skipped over these words: ***The Lord is near.*** These four words might be the axis of the whole passage. The nearness of God, the nearness of Jesus, seems to press in on Paul. This is the "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? Is he meaning a date on the calendar? Possibly. 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.

That kind of expectation of the early church was disappointed, as has been ever since. I suggest that today we can find new and powerful meaning in Paul's words about the nearness of God, of Jesus. God's presence, God's realm is ALWAYS near, always ready to break forth into our awareness and our lives and the life of our world. This is what Michael Morwood was teaching us when he was here for our retreat, that contemporary science is telling us of the presence of the creative, powerful energy of life itself being everywhere and in everything. That is what we call God. We must put away the images of an "elsewhere God", a God off in heaven, and embrace the God who is in everything and everyone as the power of life and new life. And that power is known to us and lives through us as love.

The nearness of God and God's reign stands behind every word of Paul's. The constant, gentle, steadfast pressure of God's presence, love, 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 Jesus who is with us still as the risen Christ. All we need to do is open to it, which is what the spiritual life is about.

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 does not come from escaping life's realities, but is found in the midst of life as we give ourselves to following Jesus and doing what he calls us to do for the sake of the world. It is a peace that is beyond head knowledge and we can hardly describe it in words. It is the mystery and gift that comes to us and in us as we touch the nearness of God, as our hearts are sensitive to Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us and in us. It is a peace that “guards our hearts”, that keeps us from falling into fear, anxiousness, despair, or otherwise losing the joy of knowing ourselves inseparable from God.

One last thing. I included a few verses beyond the lectionary portion for today. Essentially it is Paul saying, All this stuff I'm talking about--just keep on doing it. It is about practice. It is about working with it each and every day. Paul is not being egotistical when he says, Keep on doing the things you have heard and learned and seen in me, and then you will experience the peace of God. I think he's just saying, You all work with the things I'm working with, too, the things I am learning and growing in and coming to understand. Do that and you'll know the same peace I know.

Last summer I injured myself straining to extend my distance in swimming. I went to Mike Cundiff for some body work that would help me heal. While I was lying on the table, Mike suggested possibilities of what could be the problem. Then he asked what I did to warm up before I swam. I paused, then confessed that I had not been warming up. Mike smiled and said, Well, that was easy!

The things Paul is talking about and working with himself, the stuff we talk about with regard to the life of faith, of following Jesus, it is not about figuring it out in our heads, about intellectual knowledge. It is about practice, the things we commit to when we become members of this community. I often say to myself and sometimes to others when complaining, or discouragement, or bitterness, or a sense of spiritual emptiness arises—What are you doing with your inward journey? With your outward journey? It is most often a matter of having neglected or drifted away from our practice and indicates our need to go back to our practice. We return to the daily work and awareness and attention necessary to know God's peace, to know joy, not in our heads, but in our lives and our living.