

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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 Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

“Restore The Joy”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (NRSV)

Rejoice always, [17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. [19] Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not despise the words of prophets, [21] but test everything; hold fast to what is good; [22] abstain from every form of evil.

[23] 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. [24] The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

REJOICE ALWAYS

The first question of the shorter catechism is: “What is the chief end of” (men and women)? The chief end is to glorify God and to *enjoy* God forever.

Notice that joy is one of the first words in this classic statement of faith. To worship God is to be filled with joy. Joy is expected in the Christian life.

Joy is the theme for today this third Sunday of Advent. That’s why today’s candle is rose instead of purple.

It reminds us that joy is about to take over. It reminds us that the coming message is “good tidings of great joy.”

In our Scripture lesson Paul almost commands the Thessalonians to be joyful. He tells them, “Rejoice always.”

CUTTING BACK ON THE JOY

But, how can we rejoice always? That seems like a pretty tall order. Most years we give it the good old college try, with our endless parties, spending sprees and Christmas specials.

But this year? Not so much. Some are saying that the circumstances don’t warrant an extravagant celebration. Cut back on the joy they say. Trim your shopping lists. Cancel your holiday parties.

I saw a report on TV that even Santa Claus isn’t getting as much business as usual. This year we all get a lump of coal. And now we know the truth. It’s what I’ve always suspected. The Grinch lives on Wall Street.

Usually I'm the one that they accuse of being the Grinch. I'm the one that wants to slow down the celebration and suggest a more somber reflective approach to the season. Each year I wage a one man campaign against the excesses of an over commercialized Christmas.

But, this year I've got a different idea.
Let's throw a party.

When everyone else is saying that the joy has gone from Christmas, I sense one of those teachable moments. I sense an opportunity to talk about joy in a new way.

I sense an opportunity to talk about a joy that is not dependent upon our present circumstances.

Now let me say, first of all that I'm not in denial. I know that things are tough all over. I know that circumstances do play a large role in what we can and can't do.

And I think we should be frugal and responsible with our finances. We may have to cut back on our spending.

But, that doesn't mean that we have to cut back on the joy.

CHRISTIAN JOY

In fact Christian joy often thrives in the most difficult of circumstances.

The early church was persecuted in terrible ways, and yet we often read that they were filled with joy. The joy and love of the Christian community was their greatest evangelistic tool.

They took care of each other. People, thousands of people wanted to join a group filled with this kind of joy and love.

They lived their faith. They seemed to do what the Apostle suggested. They rejoiced always.

So what has happened to the Christian community? Most of us are certainly not that way today. The slightest misfortune can send us into a tailspin. Joy seems very much dependent upon circumstances. And when things go south we wonder, "Is there anything we can do to restore the joy?"

We need to remember that true joy is found not in what we can do for ourselves. True joy comes from the power and promises of God. So, if we're going to restore our joy, it must come from above. Spiritual renewal and true joy occur when we reestablish connection with God.

RESTORE THE JOY

Long ago the Psalmist pleaded to the Lord in prayer, “Restore ... the joy of your salvation.” (Psalm 51:12) And I think that should be our prayer today. God restore the joy. God come into my life and change me. God let salvation be more than a slogan for me; let it be a reality.

God can restore our joy. God can make salvation more than a slogan for us. I heard a modern musical on the Christmas story once and one of the songs was “Help is on the Way.”

I think that’s a good way to think about Advent and Christmas. Help is on the way! The Spirit of the living Christ is with us.

We sing, “Joy to the world the Lord is come... Let every heart prepare him room.” And that last line is the key. The Lord has come. God has come in Jesus. The joy is here. The question is this: Have we made a place for that joy in our heart?”

There are two ways to restore the joy of God’s salvation ... by becoming more prayerful and by becoming more thankful.

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Paul told the Christians at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing.”

Now once again this seems like an unrealistic idea. Surely we can’t pray all the time. Life is not one big worship service or prayer meeting. Or is it? Jesus on many occasions talked about the importance of persistence in prayer. Jesus said that we ought to “pray always” and “not lose heart.” (Luke 18:1)

Notice that there is a connection between our prayer life and the amount of joy we have in our life. If we do not pray constantly we are in danger of (as Jesus put it) losing heart. Praying constantly is not an optional extra for the super religious. Praying constantly is the life blood of our faith.

But, if we are to pray constantly it’s obvious that we need to look at prayer in a whole new way. Surely it doesn’t mean always praying on our knees with our eyes closed and our hands folded. If we did that we would all have to become monks.

PRAYER IS COMMUNICATION

But, consider this. If prayer means communication with God, isn’t it possible to talk with God about everything every day as it happens?

That’s what we do with the people we love isn’t it? Every weekday I give my mom a call and talk to her about what is going on in my life. I communicate with her.

Every evening my wife and I talk about what we've done that day. We talk about our joys and our concerns. We talk about our fears and our needs. Sometimes if something big happens during the day I will even give her a call at work. Whether the news is good or bad I just have to share it.

It is this kind of communication that makes a relationship significant. No topic is off limits.

And no matter what the circumstances there is something comforting about having someone who is willing to hear what you have to say and give you some feedback.

God is willing and eager to hear what you have to say, and God is willing and eager to answer your prayers.

But, quite often we lose heart because we do not prepare room for Him in our heart. God is not a part of our daily life. We are too busy making our own plans and doing our own thing.

Not communicating with God becomes a habit. And then one day we wake up and wonder where the joy has gone.

People think that bad circumstances make them unhappy. People think that if they could only win the lottery or receive an inheritance from a rich uncle then everything would be just fine.

But, it doesn't work that way.

Sometimes the person who unexpectedly gains everything they thought that they always wanted finds that they are even more miserable than they were before. Someone once told me that if God really wanted to punish us He will give us exactly what our hearts desire.

No matter what we have it's never enough. There's a hole in our heart, a God shaped hole that can only be filled by the presence of the Almighty.

TRY IT!

Try an experiment this week. Pray without ceasing.

By that I mean silently in your mind talk to God about every situation. Think about everything that happens in your life from a divine perspective.

I gave this advice at one of our Bible studies and a person said, "I tried that for a week once, and it just about wore me out!" I could see how that could happen. Trying to self-consciously be prayerful can be an awful strain.

But, I am suggesting that you do something a little less intense. Think about God as a loving Father with whom you are perfectly comfortable. Think about God as one who is willing to listen to what you have to say and is willing to give wise counsel when you need it.

You don't have to hide your true self from God. God knows you completely and God loves you just as you are.

All this fits very nicely with the model prayer that Jesus gave us. God is "Our Father."

Talk to God in that way. Just communicate with God about the good and the bad and the mundane. Make God a part of your life, and see if your life doesn't change. You may find the joy of your salvation restored when you prepare room in your heart for God.

GIVE THANKS

Finally, in order to restore the joy of God's salvation we need to give thanks. In the Bible, prayer and thanksgiving go together like love and marriage.

Prayer is not just asking for stuff. Prayer is giving thanks for the stuff that we already have.

I've told some of you before that when I first started in the ministry I found it to be very difficult.

Everyone came to me looking for answers and often I felt like I didn't have any answers to give. So, I decided to become more disciplined in my prayer life.

I started a prayer journal in which I would write down my prayers and reflections on all things spiritual. At the end of the month I would review what I had written.

And much to my surprise many of my prayer requests had been answered positively. But, I hadn't noticed. I wasn't grateful for the way that God had blessed me.

Just recognizing the fact that many of my prayers had been answered and giving thanks to God changed my whole outlook.

In fact, I think it is not too strong a statement to say that I'm still in the ministry today because God helped me learn to give thanks. "Giving thanks in all circumstances" (as Paul put it) can quickly restore the joy in our life. Giving thanks can be a great healer.

A MINISTER'S STORY

A minister told of a particularly bad time in his life. He and his wife had become estranged from one of their sons. The rift was so bad that he no longer came to their

house and they didn't have the opportunity to see his two girls ... their only grandchildren at that time.

At the same time, the minister and his wife were in the process of moving and he was already missing a home that he loved very much. A good friend was dying of cancer.

You know how it is. One bad thing after another happens. Sometimes it just gets to be too much.

The minister said that some people think that ministers don't have problems, but they do. And on this particular day this famous minister and author was so depressed that he didn't want to get out of bed.

But, for some reason his mind turned to the blessings in his life. He and his wife had a good relationship. They had their health. They had all the money they needed.

As this pastor began to count his blessings he realized that there was almost an embarrassment of riches in his life. He had more than most and yet he was not grateful.

The minister remembered this passage and its command to "give thanks in all circumstances." And then he remembered this passage also commanded, "do not quench the spirit."

He wondered if those two might be related – giving thanks and not quenching the spirit. And he decided that they were related because as he gave thanks for what he had he found that his spirit was being lifted by the Spirit of the Holy One.

He goes on to say that it's almost impossible to feel blue and give thanks at the same time.

I think he's right about that. Giving thanks restores the joy. Giving thanks reminds us that God's salvation is greater than any problem we might have.

You might even argue that giving thanks is the whole point of our life.

SONGS OF THANKSGIVING

A man in his late 70s was in the hospital. He was dying. It was only a matter of time.

In the middle of the night the phone rang. It was this man's wife. The hospital had called to say that the end was near. She wanted the minister to pick her up and take her to his bedside.

As they stood at the bedside the man seemed to be struggling with the oxygen mask. Several times the family members tried to straighten it, but the man continued to pull on it.

Finally the minister said, “Wait a minute. Maybe he wants to take it off so that he can say something.”

He did want to say something. He told his wife, “Hold my hand.” She did.

And as she held his hand she began to sing an old gospel song, “Victory in Jesus.” The daughter joined in with the alto part, and the son (who had been crying) began to sing tenor. When they had finished that song they sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

And then they sang “Amazing Grace.” They were on the last line of Amazing Grace, the line that goes, “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun. We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve first begun.”

At that time the monitor went flat. The man was gone.

The minister said that it was an amazing experience.

When they entered the room there had been pain and suffering and tension. But, now when the man died to the strains of those familiar old hymns there was joy, composure and even thanksgiving.

“Everything was good – life, death, everything.”

Prepare your hearts for the one who comes.
Hear the word of the Lord.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Amen.