

“Shout for Joy”

December 16, 2018

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Philippians 4:4-7

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.

SHOUT FOR JOY

The Christmas Candlelight Processional at Disney begins with these words,

“Shout for joy! Lift your voice!
Sing a song! To our God!

Shout for joy!
And rejoice!
Sing His praise!

All the earth!

Burst into jubilant song with music,
Crash the cymbal, blow the horn.

Praise the Lord in all His glory,
Sing a new song in His name.”

I think the folks at Disney got it right.

The Christmas season is all about shouting for joy, and singing a new song.

That's especially true today, this third Sunday of Advent.

Today is Gaudete Sunday.

"Gaudete" is the Latin word for "rejoice".

(And I thought all those years of high school Latin were a waste of time!)

This is the Sunday that we rejoice.

This is the Sunday when the somber mood of Advent gives way to a brighter message.

This is the Sunday when
we light the rose colored candle.

This is the Sunday when we celebrate
the peace of God,
a "peace that passes all understanding".

No doubt you've heard the message before.

Joy and peace.

Christmas cards, holiday decorations, music,
and even shopping malls all proclaim the same message:
Joy and peace.

JOY IN A BROKEN WORLD

But, how we shout for joy in a world filled with so much pain and despair?

How can we hope for peace when we are surrounded by circumstances
that promote rancor and even violence?

Paul doesn't seem to make room
for any negative thoughts like these.
Instead he writes,

"Rejoice in the Lord always.
Again I will say rejoice."

But, just saying it over and over doesn't make it a fact.

For many of us joy and peace seem to be in short supply.

Family tensions, loneliness, unexpected crises, grief, and disturbing news make joy and peace seem like a pipe dream.

We can shout for joy.
But, sometimes our shouting is drowned out by the facts of life.

And sometimes our shouting is drowned out by the anxious voices in our own head.

How can we shout for joy in times like these?

According to our passage, we need to do more than just shout.

We have to think about the source of true joy.
We have to think about a peace that is not dependent upon circumstances.

THE JOYFUL IMPERATIVE

Paul shouts for joy over and over again in his letter to the Philippians.
The apostle's letter to the Philippians is arguably his most positive letter.

But, the apostle's joy is certainly not dependent on circumstances.

When Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi, he was in prison.

And things were not much better in Philippi.
The church was threatened by false teaching, persecution, and petty squabbles.

Paul and the church in Philippi lived in precarious times.

And yet Paul could tell this endangered congregation as he languished in prison,

“Rejoice in the Lord always.”
And then he repeats himself.
“Again I say rejoice.”

It’s almost as if Paul is saying,
“Yes, you heard me right.
I said rejoice... even in times like these.”

For you English grammar fans
(and I know you’re out there),
it’s important to note that the word rejoice is in the present imperative.

That means rejoicing is not just something that we do when the season is right.

Rejoicing is a habitual attitude
that informs behavior every day.

To say it another way,
Paul is commanding the Philippians
to lead a life filled with joy.

Wow. The apostle never ceases to amaze me.
How can he do that?

How would you respond if I told you this morning,

“You will be joyful...always.
I the apostle Frank
command you to be joyful all the time”?

What would you say?

“I think our pastor’s lost it!
How can anyone command us to be joyful?”

And yet, that’s exactly what the apostle Paul says in our lesson for today.

JOY IN THE LORD

But, you may have noticed that I've left out one critical phrase. The apostle says, "Rejoice *in the Lord* always."

"In the Lord" is the key phrase. We're not talking about a joy that is based upon favorable circumstances.

If that were true, we certainly couldn't rejoice always. No one leads a life where the circumstances are always favorable.

But, it is possible to lead a life trusting that God is with us and for us in good times and bad.

In our lesson for today we learn that joy comes when we remember that "the Lord is near". (4:5)

Karl Barth once called joy a "continual defiant 'Nevertheless'."

In other words, despite evidence to the contrary, we defiantly shout with joy because we trust the promises of God more than the facts on the ground.

Sometimes joy is a kind of protest against the ways of the world.

Henri Nouwen makes an important distinction between joy and happiness. He said that happiness is dependent upon external conditions.

We're happy when we get what we want. For example, according to the TV commercial, we're happy when we finally get that Mercedes Benz as a Christmas present.

But, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death—can take that love away."

The gospel doesn't promise happiness. The gospel doesn't promise a Mercedes Benz.

But, the gospel does promise joy.

THE LORD IS NEAR

Why are we joyful?
Because, according to our Scripture,
“the Lord is near”.

God’s unconditional love is at our side.
God’s unconditional love is our rock.
God’s unconditional love sustains us when we are worn down by life.

That’s why we can rejoice always.
We believe that in the end God takes even our bad moments and uses them for good.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, asked two rhetorical questions,

“If God is for us, who is against us?
And he also asks,
Who will separate us from the love of God?”
(See Romans 8:35-39)

His point is this.
God is for us, and so it stands to reason
that no one can be against us.
God is for us, and so it stands to reason
that no one can separate us from the love of God.

So we rejoice because the Lord is near.

But, we also rejoice because we live in a community that makes this promise a reality.

We support and encourage one another.

We reflect the unconditional love of God in our life together.

This doesn’t mean our community of faith is perfect, far from it.

But, it does mean that we all have a responsibility.
When the grace of God draws near, it changes how we live and think.

We are given the responsibility to build a community that creates this sense of grace and joy.

We call that community the church.

GENTLE

How do we do that?

Paul gives us another imperative.

Just as we are commanded to rejoice because the Lord is near, so also, we are commanded to treat each other in a gentle fashion because the Lord is near.

Paul commands the Philippians, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

That word translated "gentle" suggests more than just being nice or kind. It means to be tolerant. It means to give other people a break.

If we believe that the Lord is near, then we're not going to be filled with pride and self-importance. We're not going to insist on getting our own way.

Instead, we're going to have a profound sense of humility. We're going to prefer mercy to judgment.

ANXIETY

But, there's one thing that gets in the way of this gentle way of living.

Anxiety.

We're wound too tight.

We are an anxious people.
And that anxiety harms our relationships with others.

We call this the holiday season, but I would contend we could also call this the anxious season.
And during the anxious season things often go haywire.

An anxious person gets angry easily.
An anxious person wants to impose his or her agenda on everyone else out of fear.

An anxious person is often not very tolerant or mindful of the feelings of others because he or she is so overwhelmed by emotion.
An anxious person doesn't experience much joy in life.

So, if we're going to live a life of peace and joy, we have to address the problem of anxiety.

Paul tells the Philippians:
"Have no anxiety about anything".
"Don't worry about anything".

When it comes to anxiety, just say no.

Right. How can we not do that?
Anxiety for most of us is as natural as breathing.

Once again the apostle seems to be asking the impossible of his congregation.

They live in difficult times. How can they not be filled with anxiety given their circumstances?

And I would say the same if true of us.
We too live in difficult times.
How can we not be filled with anxiety given the circumstances of our lives?

More than that, anxiety seems

to be a way of life for many of us.

Frederich Buechner said that telling someone not to be anxious was

“like telling a wino to lay off the booze or a compulsive gambler to stay away from the track”.

Just saying “no” to anxiety is an ineffective answer.

Anxiety by definition is that fear which comes out of nowhere.

So, how can we rid ourselves of anxiety when in some cases we don't even know why it's there in the first place?

PRAYER

Paul tells us to take those fears and give them to the Lord. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

One reason we pray is this: to remind ourselves that the Lord is near.

We will have anxiety in our life.

Life is filled with real reasons to worry, and from time to time most of us will have that feeling in the pit of our stomach that tells us something is just not right.

We just don't know what.

That undefined fear might be the worst fear of all.

And let's be honest the holiday season gives us even more reason to worry.

Many of us dread the extra stress it puts on our lives.

Anxiety and depression can simply take over. The problems in our life can be amplified.

So, to lesson anxiety in our life,

we take it to the Lord in prayer.

SUPPLICATION AND THANKSGIVING

But, this passage suggests
that we pray in a specific way.
The Bible tells us that we make our “supplications with thanksgiving”.

According to this passage, prayer has two parts.
The first part is supplication.
The second part is thanksgiving.

The word supplication means the act of humbly begging for something.

This is an emotional word.
This is a word that recognizes the reality of anxiety and fear and grief in our
lives.

We don't always come before God
in quiet contemplation.
Quite often we bring our fears
and pain to the Lord.

It's all out in the open.

And we humbly beg for relief.
That's supplication.

But, there's more.
We learn to pair our supplication with thanksgiving.
We go to our knees in anxious humble prayer,
but at the same time we give thanks.

We count our blessings
even as we enumerate our fears.
And those past blessings give us the confidence to trust God for today.

THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

This week I've been reading some articles about the relationship between grief and nostalgia.

When we first lose a loved one, everything seems to bring us pain.

But, over time the grief can be lessened somewhat by something we call nostalgia.

We give thanks for the life of the person we've lost and yet at the same time we are also sad for our loss.

Anxious grief and thanksgiving come together.

This is a bittersweet emotion. It's not all good, and it's not all bad. But, it can be helpful.

It can sometimes bring us a measure of peace in the middle of our personal storm.

I wonder if Paul is suggesting something similar in this passage.

Maybe healing occurs when pain and thanksgiving come together in prayer.

This is the complex joy of Advent.

We give thanks while at the same time acknowledging in a deep way the things that still fill us with fear and anxiety.

HOPE AND DESPAIR TOGETHER

The Christmas story itself speaks of hope and despair. They are always paired together:

The Son of God is born...but in a stable.
The angels proclaim peace on earth...but in a world where Herod murders children.

And the Christian story continues this way until we come to the greatest contrast of all:
a cross and a resurrection.

The Christmas story is an ancient story, but it's a modern story as well.

We still live in a world filled
with people who murder the innocents.

We still live in a world
where children are born in extreme poverty.

We still live in a world where the cry,
"No justice, no peace!" fills the air.

We still live in a world
where hope and despair live side by side.
And often it seems like despair is winning.

THE PEACE OF GOD

And yet each year at Advent
we dare to dream of peace.

We dare to imagine a world where:

joy overcomes grief,
gentleness overcomes anger,
hope overcomes fear,
and peace overcomes injustice.

Note that this peace is more
than just the absence of conflict.
This is the peace of God.

This peace is not something
that we can create for ourselves.
This is something that God must do for us.

Paul calls it the “peace of God
that surpasses all understanding”.

Don’t misunderstand.
The peace of God does not suddenly make everything okay.
Nor does this peace does relieve us
from all responsibility.

Instead, the peace of God gives us an alternative vision of the future.

The peace of God challenges us to re-imagine what the world can be,
to re-imagine what we can be.

The peace of God
pushes the limits our imagination
because God’s imagination
is so much larger than ours.

It always “surpasses our understanding”. (4:7)

GUARDING OUR HEARTS AND MINDS

But, this dream of peace does have a practical benefit.

According to our Scripture this peace “guards our hearts and minds in
Christ Jesus”. (4:7)

To guard is to protect.

And we need protection,
not just from external threats
but also (and I would say especially)
from internal threats.

According to this passage our “hearts and minds” need to be guarded by
the promise of God’s peace.

If we fill our hearts and minds
with fear and anger and anxiety,
what do you think will happen?

All that negativity will come flowing out.

But, what would happen
if we filled our hearts and minds
with the promise of God's peace as revealed in Jesus Christ?

What if we made it a point to shout for joy
in a world that just wants to shout?

AMAZING GRACE

Jonathon Kozol wrote a book
entitled *Amazing Grace*.
It's about people in the Bronx who are materially poor and yet filled with joy.

One pastor said that the fourth stanza of "Amazing Grace" was the anthem
of the people he served.

"Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace
has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

That was their guiding vision
in difficult circumstances.
They believed that the Lord was near and that one day the Lord would lead
them home.

One of Kozol's students wrote a paper that described his vision of what it
would mean for the Lord to be near:

"There will be no violence in heaven.
There will be no guns or drugs ...
Jesus will be good to all the children who have died and play with them ...
God will be fond of you."

That's a vision of a Lord who is near.
It's not just about the kingdom that comes.

It's also about what God is doing here and now.

If you forget everything else,
remember this one promise.
The Lord is near.

We rejoice because the Lord is near.
We are gentle with one another
because the Lord is near.
We find peace because the Lord is near.

That's the message of Advent.
That's our vision.
The Lord is near.
Help is on the way. And that's why we too can shout for joy!

Amen.