

“Rejoice – Always?”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

I am becoming increasingly nostalgic for January. I am not talking about Januarys from my childhood or from decades ago, but January 2020. As Barbra Streisand once sang, “*can it be that it was all so simple then?*” It was a time when we could go to the store without wearing a mask; go to a restaurant without fear of sitting too close to other people; gather in the Fellowship Hall for lunches, dinners, and coffee hours. We could visit each others’ homes without fear of contagion; lunch or coffee with a colleague was easy to arrange. My weekly schedule included Bible Study and Confirmation classes, worship services in local retirement residences, hospital visits, and home visits in which I shared Holy Communion. It was only nine months ago, but it seems like another era before COVID-19 changed almost every part of our lives.

As this Thanksgiving Day approached, we also became nostalgic for our Thanksgiving gathers in the pre-COVID era. In my childhood, Thanksgiving Day began with our final high school football game against our rivals from South Plainfield, a contest that packed the stands at our football field. In the afternoon, we would be packed around our dinner table to enjoy a feast that would leave us all stuffed and unable to move. On Friday, the truly intrepid shoppers would descend upon the local stores for Black Friday sales, while we would come together for turkey leftovers and still more gatherings. It was “the way we were” before the virus changed and defined our lives, and these memories will be with us as we attempt to celebrate Thanksgiving in these vastly different and anxious times.

Amid the nostalgia for those Thanksgivings of the past as well as the uncertainty of the times in which we find ourselves, we may be finding it difficult to muster up any sense of thankfulness, especially when we are isolated from those we love. We may even find ourselves questioning how we can join in Paul’s call for the people of God to “*rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*” (Philippians 4:4). How can we feel joy or thankfulness in these troubled times? How can we celebrate a day of thanksgiving at a time when, frankly, we do not feel like giving thanks amid the losses we have experienced and the uncertainty that defines this age of pandemic?

Paul's letter to the Philippians is saturated with references to joy and rejoicing. He begins the letter by expressing his thanks to God "*every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now*" (1:3-5), and assured the Philippians that "*I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance*" (1:18-19). He urges them to "*make my joy complete*" by being "*of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*" (2:2). Paul's love and affection for the Christians in Philippi is evident as he expresses that "*I am glad and rejoice with all of you – and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.*" (2:17-18). The apostle who rejoices in the love and faith of his Philippian brothers and sisters and who encourages them to continue to "*rejoice in the Lord always*" is not speaking from a situation in which all is going well in his life. On the contrary, Paul writes these words while imprisoned; he writes because he is unable to visit them in person. He writes so that they may know "*that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ*" (1:12-13) and that he understands his present circumstance as one in which "*I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith*" (2:17). Paul's words to the Philippians "*are perhaps the last written words of a man whose ambition was to plant congregations all over the Roman Empire*" (M. Craig Barnes). But the joy that Paul has experienced and that he shares with the Philippians is not simply the joy of human fellowship or joy that is result of human endeavors; it is joy "*in the Lord.*" Paul knows from experience that "*no matter what the circumstances, being mindful of their union with the risen Lord will evoke a deep, mysterious joy. Christian joy is not simply a feeling; it is a choice.*" (Dennis Hamm). Despite Paul's imprisonment, he is able to identify several reasons for rejoicing:

- The Gospel is being proclaimed.
- He is being supported in his suffering.
- Lives are being transformed.
- Christ will speak the final word.

Even in the face of death, "*Paul finds joy in living or dying in Christ. He has learned how to be content in all circumstances and how to receive strength when weak.*" (Wendell R. Debner).

Paul follows his exhortation to rejoice in the Lord always with an instruction that the Philippians should "*let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*"

(4:5). Such “gentleness” (*epieikes*) is a generosity toward others that is characteristic of Christ himself (“*I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ*” – 2 Corinthians 10:1) and is one of the “fruits of the Spirit” by which the Church is to be guided (“*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” – Galatians 5:22-23). This instruction is followed by the announcement that “*the Lord is near,*” which here refers to Christ’s immediate presence rather than the imminence of Christ’s second coming (“*The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*” – Psalm 145:18). Paul’s words “*are intended to encourage the Philippians to behave with consideration toward others and to think positively about their present lives*” (Morna D. Hooker).

The affirmation that the Lord is near leads naturally to the injunction not to be anxious: “*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*” (4:6). These words are reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount to “*strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*” (Matthew 6:33) as well as the call for Christians to “*cast all your anxieties upon him, for he cares for you.*” (1 Peter 5:7). Paul’s words remind his readers – past and present – that “*they have a God whom they can trust to respond to their anxiety and provide for their needs*” (Hamm), a God who provides all that we need “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*” (Small Catechism). Liberated from anxiety and worry, Christians are instead “*in everything by prayers and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*” It means that in *every circumstance* – imprisonment, community conflict, or harassment from external adversaries (and we might also add worldwide pandemic) we know that God is always with us and will provide all that we need. In urging prayers of petition, Paul insists that it be made with thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) – a reminder that our confidence in God rests on the ways we have already known his power that in Philippi has begun “*a good work among you*” (1:6). The result is that “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (4:7). Trusting in God, expressed in prayer within the Christian community, will lead to this “peace of mind” that comes solely from God in Christ Jesus: “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*” (John 14:27).

- “This is how it is done. You are held in the grip of suffering. He turns you away from it and gives you such courage that you would think you were sitting

in a rose garden. Thus there is life in the midst of dying, and peace and joy in the midst of adversity, and that is why it is a peace, that, as St. Paul says to the Philippians, surpasses all understanding.” – Martin Luther, 1523.

Paul’s closing words to the Philippians are a message of encouragement for them to continue in what they are doing in living together every day as faithful sons and daughters of God. They are encouraged to think about “*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise*” and to “*keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me*” (4:8-9). Since God is the origin of all that is good and true and honorable, Christians should acknowledge and make use of these qualities in their lives in the sure and certain knowledge that “*the peace of God will be with you.*”

- “Without any rational reason to believe that the church would actually succeed, [Paul] ends his life by telling us just to do whatever is right. ‘Keep on doing’ it, he says. Do it again and again. ‘And the God of peace will be with you.’”
– Barnes.

This is going to be a most unusual and challenging Thanksgiving. For many of us, it will mean that our traditional family gatherings will not be possible. We might try to compensate by having “virtual” feasts on Zoom or hosting smaller gatherings for those in our immediate circle. We might phone the people we would have seen in person or share photos on Instagram of the meals we have prepared. But it is a day in which we will also acknowledge what we have lost in this pandemic season, what has been taken away from us. We may even go so far as to challenge Paul as to how we can possibly “rejoice” at a time when joy feels like the furthest emotion we can embrace. But Paul’s words are also accompanied by Paul’s example of how he found joy even in a squalid Roman prison, how he was able to rejoice amid his disappointment that his plans for taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth would not be realized in his lifetime, how he could encourage others to rejoice always because the source of their joy was “in the Lord” who is with us even in life’s most difficult moments, who abides with us even when other aspects of life are not present, and who promised that all that God has promised will be accomplished even though this may not appear possible at the present time. The rejoicing that is possible even in this most difficult of Thanksgiving celebration is rooted in the “*joy [that] overflows from a deep inner assurance of the benefits of Christ and contentment in God. Spiritual values transcend temporal values and provide us with a basis for celebration and a reason for confidence.*” (Debner).

- “Let us therefore be contrite but without anxiety, for powers and times are not gods but mortal gifts from God; let us acknowledge our defeat but without despair for all societies and epochs are transient details, transmitting an everlasting opportunity that the kingdom of heaven may come, not in our present and not in our future, but in the fullness of time.” – W.H. Auden.

Our liturgy of Holy Communion calls us to remember that “*it is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ.*” We are able to rejoice and give thanks even during this difficult time in our lives because no matter what challenges or difficulties we may face, we know that God is with us, that we are God’s beloved children, and that “*though the wrong seems oft so strong God is the ruler yet.*” We can “rejoice … always” because we rejoice “in the Lord,” who will bring us through this dark chapter in the comfort of God’s holy and steadfast hope and the light of Christ that shines in the darkness and that no darkness can overcome. We can rejoice, give thanks, and sing, because “*the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Yes, we can and will “rejoice … always” this Thanksgiving. Even though we may be missing from each other’s tables, our Lord is with us now, and our Lord will lead us and guide us until that day when we gather together at the table of the Lord, when we will rejoice as we “*dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*” (Psalm 23:6). Because God is always with us, we can always rejoice!

Amen.