

Advent 3, Year B
Dec. 11, 2011
1 Thess. 5:16-25

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

Luke 1:39-56

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.” (NRSV)



The candle our youth lit this morning is pink instead of purple because this Sunday, the third Sunday in advent, represents a shift toward the joy of Christmas. It’s as if some of the white of the Christ candle has been mixed with the rich purple of Advent, giving us the color pink and much reason for joy.

In our epistle lesson this morning, Paul bids us to “rejoice always” and to be “thankful in all things.”

Good advice, but it’s advice we don’t often follow. In our culture, we don’t give much thought to “joy.” We’ve reduced joy to pleasure and happiness and having more than our share of wealth and enjoying a high social standing.

It’s hard for us to imagine being joyous just as a way of being. When we’re not playing with our toys or basking in the limelight of our own greatness, we can be pretty miserable. We can wallow in our misery, bathe in our sorrow, and clothe ourselves in depression.

Often a great many of us feel ourselves shifting from one end of the spectrum to the other with great regularity and rapidity. We don’t have to have diagnosis of bipolar disorder to know that we don’t have a good grip on our emotions, and we certainly don’t know joy as a way of being.

Our emotions are simple and shift often: anger, boredom, pleasure, sadness. We’re mad at someone one moment, happy the next, then bored out of our minds, and finally exhausted and sad.

Perhaps, it's human nature to assume that happiness is based on one's personal situation. When things seem grim and hopeless, we find ourselves devoid of joy. As our situation improves, so does our outlook. Our countenance will swing wildly and unpredictably, depending on what circumstance we find ourselves. Paul's advice to "rejoice always" and to be "thankful in all things," seems impossible.

But perhaps, just perhaps, the root cause of our mercurial disposition maybe that we are selfish, and selfish people can't really know true lasting joy, because when we are selfish we are never satisfied. We always want what we do not have. We exist in a state of constant discontent.

It's not entirely our fault. We grow up listening to advertisers and marketers who are great at what they do. The best the world has ever seen. They are very highly paid professionals who use science, psychology, and lots of money to convince us—brainwash us—that they have the products we need to live full and happy lives. We'll be popular with other people, respected even, because of the shoes we wear or the car we drive or the toys we have. Our very worth is connected to the stuff we own.

And we believe them. We may not run out and buy their particular product, but we believe the core philosophy: It's all about me. It's all about what I want and need so I can live the good life.

Because we've built our lives of the shifting sands of the philosophy of personal happiness, we never find lasting joy. We find plenty of pleasure, pain, sadness, anger, lots of frustration, lots of boredom, and let's not forget shame, but peace and joy elude us.

I have a wonderful prescription for our modern problem. It's a simple, ancient prescription: It's not all about you! It's not all about you or me or any one person! Life isn't about having the best toys or chasing after fleeting pleasures and objects of wealth.

So, if life isn't about making ourselves as happy as can be, what is life really about?

Try this one for size: life is really about grace, compassion, and love.

I was listening to a fascinating segment on NPR about rats. Now, I don't actually make a distinction between different kinds of rodents—a mouse, a guinea pig, a hamster, they're all rats to me. But, despite my antipathy toward rodents, this segment on NPR fascinated me.

Did you know that rats even display compassion for other rats? If you put two rats together, let them become friends, and then take one of the rats and trap him in a small enclosure so that he can get to his food or water, the other rat will try to get him out. He'll chew on the enclosure; walk all over it; fidget with the door; he'll try everything his little rat brain can think to do to help his friend out. If you put a little lever on the door, the rat will actually learn how to let his friend out. And from then on, if you put his friend in the trap, he'll go and let him out almost immediately.

Now, that's pretty impressive all on its own, but what if you put two traps in the cage. What if you put his friend in one trap and chocolate in the other? Now, rats love chocolate, just like people. In fact, there are all sorts of similarities between your average rat and your average person. Now, surely the rat will

go and open the trap with the chocolate and eat all that chocolate before he goes to let his friend out, right?

Here's the surprising thing—the rat will open both traps, in no particular order, but then he and his buddy will munch on the chocolate together. He could have first helped himself to all the chocolate, and then, fat and happy, he could have swaggered on over to let his friend out. But, instead, he chose to share his chocolate with his cage mate.

Apparently, rats are smarter and more compassionate than a great many human beings, who are content to stuff themselves while others starve. What good is it to gorge yourself silly while others languish away in poverty? How is that fun? How could that ever be a good prescription for lasting happiness? Maybe we need to learn to share our chocolate!

If we want to rejoice always and be thankful in all things, then we must realize that lasting joy and peace of mind and heart come from for a spirit of compassion, of grace, of giving. In other words, lasting peace and joy come from the Spirit of Christ Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the Song of Mary, the Magnificat. Standing in the Old Testament line of Miriam and of Hannah, Mary sings of God's great triumph. It is an expression of overwhelming joy. Her song has puzzled Christians for generations because of its past tense. She sings of the world having been made right even before her child is born. She sings of powerful reversals:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Mary's joyful song is a declaration that the Spirit of Christ has already won even before the first battle! Justice has come, once and for all time, in Christ Jesus. The powerful and mighty of the earth have fallen and the meek and lowly have been lifted up. She sings of the cosmic, universal work of God in the process of incarnation. The Spirit's work is not limited to the past or the future or the present, but the Spirit's work encompasses all time, past, present, and future.

Thus, compassion, mercy, justice, and righteousness are the works of Christ Jesus. When we participate in these, we can have true joy and we can give thanks in all things, because we are living in the spirit of Christ. We can know lasting joy, because we are children of God and citizens of God's kingdom.

I heard a story this last week. I don't know if it's true. It's one of those stories that preachers tell—and it changes from pastor to pastor. I put my own little tweaks to the story, which goes something like this:

A young woman went to volunteer down at a homeless shelter for mothers and children. She saw great poverty and her heart was deeply grieved. It was a cold night, and she saw a young child with no shoes, no coat, not even a blanket. The child was about the same size as her own, so she called her husband and had him bring a pair of shoes, a coat, and a warm blanket. She hurried in and gave the child these things, plus a hot meal.

It was the little boy's first time in a church, and here was this lovely woman sharing with him more than he'd ever had in his life, so out of his innocence he asked her a simple question.

The child looked up at her and asked, "Are you God?"

The woman answered, "No, I'm just a child of God."

The young boy then said, "I knew you had to be related."

The woman laughed and said, "You know what, you're a child of God, too. So, that makes us related. We're all children of God."

If you want to have lasting joy and a thankful spirit, then remember that we are all children of God. We're all related. Happiness then, isn't about the acquiring personal wealth or status.

True happiness is about being related together in Christ Jesus. It's about feeding the hungry, liberating the oppressed, seeking justice, making peace, bringing hope, and sharing the Good News about Jesus.

True happiness, lasting joy, my friends, is about sharing your chocolate.

It's not all about you. It's not all about me. It's about all of us, every one of us, being a child of God in Christ Jesus.