

Sermon for November 18, 2018
Sunday before Thanksgiving
“Rejoice Always!”

Philippians 4:4-9

♪ Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative and latch on to the affirmative,
don't mess around with Mr. in between. ♪

Is that really what the Bible is saying here in Philippians? Is this passage the Biblical equivalent of “Don't Worry, Be Happy?” Sometimes I don't feel like rejoicing.

I hear the news or read the paper and it makes me what to shout or cry. We live in a world where people are killed for no reason. We live in a world where there is evil and injustice and abuse. How can I rejoice in the face of all that human suffering?

What was Paul the Apostle thinking where he wrote this? How dare he tell me to rejoice always? I can't just ignore the awful truths about this world. If I do, I am less a human and less a Christian for it.

Let me tell you a story. A young pastor friend of mine told me once about an event that he witnessed. He had gone to the local fast food restaurant to get some dinner. He was sitting in the drive through and there was a line of cars. As he sat there a man and a woman came out of the back of the restaurant and started arguing. Then the man pulled a gun, shot the woman, and then shot himself.

It was the most horrific thing he had ever seen. He told me that the next Sunday he would be preaching on this passage. I asked him why, thinking maybe he was in denial about the horror he had just witnessed. He pointed out that the passage does not just say to rejoice always as if nothing bad ever happened. It says to rejoice “in the Lord” always.

In this world people kill and abuse and oppress and tragically throw their lives away. There is no way we can rejoice in all that pain and suffering. But we can rejoice in the Lord. We can thank God that through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, God is here with us in the midst of our suffering. God gives us hope in the midst of seeming hopelessness.

I think my friend was right about the meaning of this passage. After all Paul was writing this letter from prison. He was in jail, but he found reason to rejoice. Earlier in the book he tells how because of his imprisonment he had been able to tell the guards about the Lord. He may be in prison falsely accused, but he can still rejoice in what the Lord is doing.

In this context the rest of the reading makes sense. He writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Can you imagine how anxious he must have been wondering what the judge would say and what the outcome would be? I don't know about you but in such a circumstance I would be imagining all the worst case scenarios. But instead of dwelling on his worries, Paul prays. And the end result of this prayer is that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Then he says to focus on whatever is true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable. I would tend to focus on what is wrong and a lie and what is awful and tragic and... I don't think Paul is saying “don't worry, be happy.” I don't think he means to ignore the injustices and such, but rather in the face of them choose to see and focus on the positive. Then even in the midst of oppression and injustice we can find peace.

Isn't that what happened at the first Thanksgiving? The pilgrims didn't have it easy. They barely survived, many of them died. They faced uncertainty. If it had not been for the kindness of their new Native American friends they probably would have all died.

And the Native Americans didn't have it much easier. Sure they knew the land and how to live on it. But what about these new strangers. What would they do to it? Would they get in each other's way? They had forged a tenuous alliance with them, but would it last?

Instead of focusing on their insecurities and uncertainties, instead of dwelling on the dangers that faced them, both chose to focus on what is good and true and pure. They chose to give thanks and feast as brothers and sisters. They chose to see the peace and hope and noble and admirable things. And we are still celebrating that decision to embrace those who are different from us and to focus on God's blessings, even though we haven't always lived up to it.

I have discovered that giving thanks is often at its greatest when life is at its worst. People give thanks best when they seem to have nothing to be thankful for. A case in point: the hymn "Now Thank We All Our God." Let me just read it to you: "Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love and still in ours today." The second verse is a prayer for God's protection and the last verse a doxology.

The surprising thing is that this hymn was written in the midst of the 30 years war. The author of these words was Martin Rinkart. He was serving as the pastor of a church in Eilenberg. During his time there the city was overrun by armies at least three times and was constantly dealing with large numbers of refugees. In 1637 there was a plague in which 8,000 people died. At one point Rinkart was the only pastor left and was performing 40 or 50 funerals a day!

Suddenly the words of his hymn take on new meaning: "Thank we all our God...who wondrous things has done...countless gifts of love." In the midst of such great human suffering; pain, loss, illness, that such a hymn as this could be written is a miracle. Many of us, as blessed as we are, could never offer up a prayer of thanks like this! Yet out of this womb of human suffering the great hymn of thanksgiving was born. He truly chose to focus on the things that were true and admirable.

You know we cannot control the evil in the world, but we can decide how we will react. It has been said, "Some people are always grumbling because roses have thorns; I am thankful that thorns have roses." (Alphonse Karr) It is true. We can choose how we react to our circumstances. Tecumseh, a Native American leader, said, "When you rise in the morning, give thanks for the light, for your life, for your strength. Give thanks for your food and for the joy of living. If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself."

Don't ignore the poverty and injustice and oppression in the world this Thanksgiving. Lift those concerns up to God in prayer. Then in the face of those things choose to focus on whatever is true and good and kind. Give thanks for the volunteers that feed the hungry not just on Thanksgiving but every day. Give thanks for the efforts to bring people freedom and justice. Give thanks for those who show Christian hospitality to refugees and strangers. Thank God that we have hope and peace.

Rejoice in the Lord always. It bears repeating, Rejoice! Don't ignore the problems of life, but lift them up to God. Choose to look for the bright spots in the darkness. Then you will know peace that transcends the troubles of this world.