

December 17, 2017 – Journey Worship

Text: I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Title: Rejoice, Pray, Give Thanks, Repeat

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” In the middle of today’s passage we find this imperative from Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica. It’s obvious that Paul is either responding to inquiries or addressing an issue or problem that has arisen among the early believers. According to Acts 17, Paul preached three Sabbaths in Thessalonica and his message was so persuasive and powerful that he angered and enraged the some of the Jews in the synagogue. To avoid their anger, Paul and Silas were smuggled out of the city in the dead of the night. Paul didn’t know how or whether his message would take hold, as there was no way to know whether his three weeks in Thessalonica was adequate time for the new Christians to fully grasp or understand the entirety of the message he preached. Ever the shepherd, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonian to find out how the converts were fairing. Timothy reported, the Christians were standing firm in their faith, but there was some troubling news as well. While there, Paul had preached about the eschaton, the second coming of Christ, creating in some a hysterical expectancy resulting in them abandoning their ordinary pursuits and work, solely concentrating on waiting for the Day of the Lord, while some others were troubled not knowing what would become of those who died before that coming day, whether they would be saved or be lost.

I do realize this is the third Sunday in Advent and the second coming the Thessalonians had concerned themselves with was not the coming of the Christ child, but the return of the ascended Christ. However, our issue is the reverse of what was reported by Timothy. Many of our concerns today have diverted our eyes, hearts and spirit off the coming of the Christ child and focused them on world events that don’t line up with what Paul preached and taught, behaviors, attitudes, actions or events that are of God, and Paul’s words are just as appropriate today as they were then: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

In the verses that precede our passage this morning, Paul addressed the structure of the Christian community, instructing the Thessalonians to show respect, esteem and love towards their leaders, both clergy and lay and in turn, he tells leaders they are to encourage, help, be patient and seek to do good. Then Paul issues a general appeal to the entire community, an appeal that lies at the very heart of every Christian life and that is in opposition to everything that we tend to experience as it relates to the world today; do good to everyone, help the weak, don’t repay evil for evil.

One commentator states: “In Paul’s first century context, the standard governing human relationships....was about pay back, about maintaining and guarding one’s respect (not giving respect)....Paul’s appeal goes against the grain of this self-centered world,

admonishing not only to a way of life in the community, but in openness towards all.” (Dirk G. Lange, Associate Dean, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn; www.textweek.com)

Today’s world is not much different. Rather than looking and working for the good of the majority, many are self-centered, solely focused on what benefits them or others like them. Even those elected to represent everyone, are focused on what’s in the best interest of their donors and people like themselves. Preparing to pass legislation that will further financially handicap and disempower the poor and the middle class, all while declaring there isn’t enough money to fund Chip, (Children’s Health Insurance Program), strategically dismantling Obamacare, debating the merits of housing and heating subsidies for the least of these and rescinding environmental protections and equal access to the internet, the President and legislators have promised a Christmas gift unlike any other in the history of the world.

While in our worshiping community and I’m sure the same is true of others, there are countless examples of members, staff and pastors who are not focused on self, passively waiting for the Advent of the Christ child. This week alone, through the hard work, sacrifice of time, finances and prayer, we have collected over 200 gifts for more than 100 children to ensure they each have something under the tree Christmas day; we have ministered to people who have lost their homes or livelihood; provided grocery gift cards to families that are food insecure; paid rent, light, gas and water bills that others might have a safe haven; and prayed for, visited, comforted and held the hands of the sick, homebound or grieving.

Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to: “admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” That’s our life’s work as Christians, to focus on the needs of others within the community. Those instructions might be difficult to follow or adhere to when we take our attention off the real reason for this season, and engage in the commercialization of Christmas, the politics of the last several years and most assuredly the past year; natural and manmade disasters; daily revelations of famous, influential and powerful people who have abused their position by inappropriately interacting with others, both women and men; the continual marginalization, discrimination and demonization of certain groups of people and the ever widening financial gap –no wonder that it’s difficult to live into Paul’s imperatives, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

It’s difficult to embrace and follow Paul’s instructions for waiting, when we think about all that is wrong, disheartening, or unjust in this world. The Thessalonian Christians were equally perplexed when Christ didn’t return quickly as anticipated. Paul’s admonitions were not laws or commands to be fulfilled, but the work of the Spirit of God in community and in the lives of believers. It is still the Spirit’s work to enliven, encourage, empower and sustain rejoicing, unceasing prayer and thanksgiving in all circumstances, especially when it seems there isn’t much to rejoice, pray or give thanks about. Brothers and sisters, Paul reminds us that the one who calls us is faithful, sanctifies, strengthens

and sustains us. The way of life that characterizes our time of waiting is not focused on self, but on him who came that everyone might have life in abundance.

Next week, we will relive the story of the Christ child born to an engaged, unmarried, expectant teenager, travelling with her older husband to register and pay their tax; a tax appropriated on those who were the most vulnerable, requiring unreasonable travel, with no provision along the way. I'm sure as Mary and Joseph were on the road, they were cognizant that the child could potentially be born under less than ideal circumstances, and so it was. Jesus' conception, birth, life, death and even his need to redeem us was a result of all that was wrong and ungodly in this world, but the Christ child's birth and anticipated coming again have given us a reason to hope, a reason to rejoice and reason to pray without ceasing and reason to give thanks under all circumstances. Christ has come and is coming again, and we will work as well as pray.

In the words of Paul: " May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ so rejoice, pray, give thanks and repeat. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Amen.