

December 12, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [1 Thessalonians 1:1–10](#)

TITLE: **Advent Joy: Recipients of Joy**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Over the years I have officiated at a lot of weddings and a lot of funerals. I recently realized that by and large the funerals are much more memorable. That seems odd. Funerals are somber affairs, while weddings are festive—gowns and tuxedos, flowers and fanfares. The difference is that you don't have testimonials at weddings. People don't tell stories about the wedding couple until later, like at a reception during a time of champagne toasts. But people often tell stories at a funeral. It might be a formal eulogy or something shared by a friend who asks to say a few words. Funeral speeches are not always the most polished, but because they are given from the heart, they are memorable. They stick with us. They are a gift and in subtle ways they change us forever.

Kathleen Norris tells of a small Presbyterian church in North Dakota that always paused after the sermon for a time of sharing “joys and concerns.” It's a time to learn that a young mother is worried about her brother in Oregon or the eighty-year old widower is overjoyed at the birth of a great-grandchild. Norris noted that all this pleased the town gossips and phones would ring off the hook Sunday afternoons with the news picked up in church. But it was a good kind of gossip, the type that widens the prayer circle and builds connections in a church family.

This small church's new young pastor had opened up the time of joys and concerns when someone mentioned that Bill O'Rourke had died—known as Wild Bill from back in his drinking days. The pastor didn't know him, but someone from the back broke the silence and said, “You know, Bill paid me the first fifty cents I ever made, back in 1950.” After a moment, someone else said, “And I bet you still have that fifty cents.” Folks laughed and began sharing stories about Wild Bill: how he'd broke horses for the U.S. Cavalry in World War II, leaving him permanently bow-legged; how he could always be found in the corner booth at the Main Street café; how he collected old Ford pickup trucks and kept them polished and in good running condition. The stories continued for a while since almost everyone had known Wild Bill. The memories were a gift in that day's “joys and concerns.” Finally the minister said “Let us pray.” But in a way, the congregation had been praying all along.¹

Last Sunday we remembered a former member, Sue Bailey, with a short service held in the chapel after worship. Honestly, I thought only a few people would be there, so I had my Book of Common Worship and imagined reading a few scriptures, saying the words of committal, and closing with a prayer. But quite a few folks came, including some who'd known Sue for years. So I opened it up for people to share stories. They told about Sue's artistic and creative gifts, her commitment to peace, and her advocacy for children. Soon the entire service changed. It went from a somber time of funeral ritual to a joyful celebration of Sue's life. And not only did the service change. We changed too.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is one of the first letters of his that we have. In fact, it is one of the first written records of the entire Christian church. Jesus' death and resurrection occurred sometime between 30 and 33 AD. Paul wrote this letter around 50 AD—between 17–20 years after Christ. We can assume that lots of people who had seen Jesus or heard him preach were still alive. And we know that the first disciples of Jesus spread the gospel in Jewish Palestine, followed by later apostles like Paul who carried the gospel into the neighboring lands of what is now Turkey and Greece. With this letter, though, we can actually see how the seeds of faith had taken root. So what does the first chapter of the first Christian letter tell us?

People may think that Paul was a loner, a wandering street evangelist like the gentleman who occasionally stands on the corner of Penn & Highland and preaches to the passing pedestrians or folks waiting at the bus stop. But the letter opens by naming a team—Paul, Silvanus, Timothy—a group with different gifts but a shared faith. Just like a letter from ELPC might begin “Randy, Heather, Patrice, BJ.”

We don't know how Paul shared the gospel to the Thessalonians. According to the book of Acts, he did preach in the synagogues. But he was also a leather worker by trade. So perhaps he struck up conversations with people as they came to him for work. Maybe the gospel was proclaimed not just by sermons but by telling stories, in conversations held over a workbench or around a dinner table. Like that small North Dakota church, maybe the sharing of the gospel grew out of a time of “joys and concerns”; perhaps it had less to do with anything formal and more to do with stories shared informally—telling others where God's love and grace and peace had taken root in your life.

The bulk of this first chapter in Paul's letter is an expression of thanksgiving, giving thanks to God for the works of this young church. Paul's words are quite honest and very sincere. He knew that accepting this gospel meant being persecuted and afflicted. Yet Paul had seen the Holy Spirit take root in their lives. He'd seen how they'd been changed, and most important of all, Paul acknowledged that his time with them had changed him as well. In verse 5 Paul writes “*You know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.*” Something in this interaction in Thessalonica changed both the bearers and the receivers of the Christian message. Paul, Silvanus, Timothy became more than they were before, just as the listeners in that Greek city were changed as well. They all became evangelists. They all became imitators of one another, and their common witness became known throughout the entire region. And all of this—all of this—is described as a time of joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Joy is not the same as happiness. It is not a smile that comes to our face when we buy something special. It is not that feeling of contentment when we put our feet up at the end of the day or after a big meal. Joy is something inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is active, not passive. It is breathed in and out of us in a way that is communal, vulnerable; it is something that changes us for the good. It may be felt in a small church as they tell stories about Wild Bill and give thanks for his life. It may be felt in our chapel here when memories of a friend literally transform that time and space into a celebration and a common smile. It is the ability to say joyfully, “You know what kind of person we proved

to be when we were together” —and then holding on to that memory, to work at becoming better than we’d ever thought possible in Christ through the Holy Spirit. To do that is to be a recipient of Holy Spirit Joy and it is a key part of being a Christian.

Marcus Tullius Cicero lived in ancient Rome a hundred years before Jesus. He was a statesman, orator and philosopher. In one of his writings, he quoted a Roman poet who’d written these words: *Those who graciously show the way to someone who is lost kindles, so to speak, a light from their own light. For their own shines no less because they have lit another’s.* Showing someone the way—lighting someone’s torch from your own torch causes you no diminishment, but through that act, both parties are blessed. Ones who walked in darkness receive a light that can guide them on the path ahead. Like on Christmas Eve we light our candles from one another’s candles. No one person’s flame is the lesser for this, but together all are illuminated—all can now see—all come together to sing “Joy to the World.”

The theme for the third Sunday of Advent is joy. Our passage from Thessalonians spoke of “joy inspired by the Holy Spirit,” which meant that joy is not a static, passive thing but something active, that moves and comes to be in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It made me think of when we share “joys and concerns” while in church. It made me think of Sue Bailey and becoming a different person through remembering and celebrating her life. It reminded me of Cicero and Advent candles—a flame that is shared is never diminished. What a gift all that is. And in a way, some aspect of all of this was also felt by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy as they shared the gospel long ago. Paul remembered the Thessalonian church with gratitude and joy. He reminded himself and them of what kind of person he proved to be for their sake. And he knew that all was needed now was for them (and us) to continue joyfully imitating what we’ve seen in Christ and one another.

So with the apostle Paul, I also say to you: Grace and peace and joy be with you now and always.

AMEN

¹ Kathleen Norris, [The Cloister Walk](#), 1996, pp. 280-82.