
Rejoice in the Lord Always

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 23, Year A

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

...Beloved, 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, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4-9)

Rejoice in the Lord, always.

All Sunday services are personal for me. And all sermons are personal for me. But today is especially personal for me. Today's passage from Philippians, chapter 4, has been a part of me ever since I was a child. It is an important part of who I am.

"Rejoice in the Lord always... Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, ...excellent, worthy of praise, think on these things." I believe that advice. I try to live that advice. Those words have guided and supported not just my ministry, but my very life. I am touched, especially today, that my friend and choir member and parishioner of this church, Chuck Beaudrot, has written a piece of music, an anthem, that uses that text, in honor of my ministry during the covid pandemic years. The beautiful Cathedral Choir will sing that anthem during today's offertory. Thank you, Chuck!

I begin with a confession. I am aware that many people consider me naïve. When people have evaluated me, they have often called me naïve, and unaware. Over time, I have concluded that that is fine. I admit that I like to tend towards the light, towards the bright. I try to choose the positive. "Optimism" is one of the values of my life. As a teen-ager, one of my favorite singers was a folk singer named John Sebastian – a madrigal singer maybe! —who sang things like, "What A Day For A Daydream," and "I'll Paint Rainbows All Over Your Blues."

Optimism is a value for me -- not naïve optimism, mind you. Like many of you, I have known suffering and sadness. And I fully admit that there are lots of reasons in life not to rejoice. When things are tough, and someone comes chirping up, "Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say, rejoice" – when someone naively chirps that to me in my pain, I want to shut their mouth.

I think that one of the reasons I became a priest is because so many of my friends died before I was sixteen years old. I had six friends die when I was between six and sixteen years old. Cancer, asthma, car accidents. I consider myself close to death. As a priest, I will always try to accept any request to officiate at a funeral. They are holy events. Death can be a holy event.

Besides John Sebastian, my other favorite singer was almost his opposite: a poet named Leonard Cohen. My man, Leonard Cohen, in his low, slow voice, sang about darkness. "There is a crack in everything," he sang; "I caught the darkness," he sang.

So, I live in both realms, darkness and light. And I like both realms. I find the Holy in both realms. I find God in both realms. I like to think that Saint Paul did, too. It is thought that when Paul wrote the words that we heard today. "Rejoice in the Lord, always," he was writing from prison. He was locked up. And yet, in the four short chapters of the Letter to the Philippians, Saint Paul uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" at least sixteen times.

Wherever we are, and whoever we are, there are always reasons not to rejoice. There are always reasons not to rejoice, wherever we are. Today we agonize over the brutal horror and violence in the world. Hamas terrorists have invaded Israel. Ukrainians and Uyghurs are suffering. Innocents are suffering in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine. We mourn the slaughter of the innocents. Peaceful and just resolution will be long and complicated.

But, wherever we are, and whoever we are, there are also reasons to rejoice. There are also reasons to rejoice, wherever we are.

How in the world can I say that? I point to the advice offered by Saint Paul, who was in prison. "Beloved, 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, think about these things." Wherever you are, look for what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy.

Again, I realize that this is easy advice for people who are living comfortably. I remind us that rejoicing does not mean ignoring or avoiding the pain; but does mean lifting up something else. I will always admire the great Jewish thinker and therapist, Victor Frankl, who developed his life-giving therapy while he was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. He talked about staying alive through finding meaning, and even joy, even during suffering. Values, he said—values—are what give us life and joy.

Yes. There are values that provide joy, even in the midst of suffering. During the covid pandemic, there was suffering and persistent fear. But some of us strove to think on whatever was true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable. When we think on those things, even in the midst of disaster, something happens in us. We are not avoiding, or dismissing, the suffering. We fully acknowledge it, just like a Leonard Cohen song does; and, like him, we move from suffering to dancing.

When we watch for whatever is true and honorable and just, it is then—it is then—that the other incredible phrase of Saint Paul becomes real: "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

I know that one version says "*guard* your hearts and minds." But, as you know, I do not use that translation. Because the word, "guard," conjures up fear for me, as if there is something out to get me, to cause me fear, to set paranoia in me. Fear is the opposite of love.

I do not want to think about being guarded. I want to think about enjoying the present, the small moments of joy that are available in the present. I want to think about "whatever is true, honorable, just, whatever is pure, pleasing, commendable, anything excellent and anything worthy of praise."

There is a peace that passes all understanding. I do not understand it, but I have known it. There is a joy that surpasses suffering. I do not understand it, but I have known it. There is a love that surpasses evil. I do not understand it, but I have known it.

Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again, I will say, "Rejoice."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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