
If You Know this Prayer, You're Good!

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Advent 3 – Year C

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

I heard an old story recently about an elderly man who lived in Phoenix. The man calls his son in New York and says, “I hate to ruin your day, but your mother and I are getting a divorce. It’s been forty-five years of misery and I can’t handle any more.”

The son screams at his father, “Pop what are you talking about?”

The father responds, “No, we can’t stand the sight of each other any longer. We’re sick and tired of each other. I can’t talk about it anymore. Just call your sister in Chicago and tell her.” Then, he hangs up.

The son calls his sister in Chicago and tells her what their father had said.

She gets really upset, calls her father in Phoenix, and screams at him, “You’re not getting divorced. Do not do a single thing until I get there. I’m calling my brother back. We’ll both be there tomorrow. But, until then, do you hear me, don’t do a thing.” And then, she hangs up.

The old man puts his phone down, turns to his wife, and says, “Honey, the kids are both coming home for Thanksgiving. They’ll be here tomorrow ... and they’re paying their own way!”

There are things that push our buttons and when they do, we can get pretty reactive pretty quickly. Often these things have something to do with our fear that we are not going to get what we want or that something bad is about to happen to us. It can be paralyzing.

With bigger, more important things, our sense of helplessness may make us angry and lead us to strike out randomly at something or someone.

With the smaller things, though, we are more likely to swallow our anger and let it fester into resentment.

This is, I think, is what Paul is worried about in his letter to the Philippians – festering resentment.

Paul is in jail, probably in Ephesus around the year 55. It seems that his friends there have turned against him and he is facing a charge that might mean his death. But, he seems eager to write a letter to the church in Philippi thanking them for money that they sent to him.

They didn’t take care of you in the kind of jail Paul was in. If your family and friends didn’t bring you food, water, and clothing, then you didn’t eat, drink, or stay warm.

Apparently, the messenger had been delayed because he had gotten sick while traveling from Philippi to Ephesus. Paul starts the letter by explaining that the delay was not because the messenger had stolen the money. But then, Paul quickly turns to the conflict that he has heard about in the church.

It seems that two of the women who had been responsible for the founding of the church have had a falling out with each other. Paul is worried about their struggle. He knows from his recent experience in Corinth that communities that bring together people from different social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds can find it hard to trust each other.

Tension is inevitable, but when it involves the leaders of the community, it can make everybody feel threatened.

When a new group unexpectedly gains power, it can feel like someone has cut in line after you have stood there for a long time. Even if it's not a big deal, somehow things just aren't the same anymore. You start looking around for other things that aren't right and become more protective of our own space.

As people close themselves off from each other, it's hard for the Spirit to find a place to do its work.

Paul tries to prevent this closing off by encouraging the community to be more like Jesus. He doesn't tell them what to think, as much as he tells them how to think. He wants their faith to transform how they look at their lives and each other. He seems confident that the transformation they will experience will feel like a blessing and bring them back together.

But then, he gives some unexpected encouragement.

"Rejoice in the Lord always," Paul urges, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:4, 7)

What does that mean exactly ... "rejoice in the Lord always"?

And, how are any of us supposed to do that?

Surely, Paul is not just saying "don't worry, be happy."

Surely, he is not telling us to ignore injustice or turn a blind eye to the suffering of others.

I think that "joy," as Paul is using the word, is the awareness of being loved by God, even when times are hard.

It's not about ignoring injustice or turning a blind eye to suffering.

It's not even about being happy.

It's about having a deep intuitive sense that life is on our side, even as we face death.

I think that the root of this kind of joy is gratitude. We sometimes assume that joy brings us gratitude, but I believe it's gratitude that brings us joy.

The twentieth century Dutch spiritual guide and counselor, Henri Nouwen, describes the movement from resentment to gratitude as a conscious choice. It's about choosing to be grateful, even when you're not really feeling it. It's work, to be sure, but over time everything proves to be full of grace.

Nouwen offers a vivid image to illustrate this movement.

One day he saw a sculptor chipping pieces of stone off of a large rock. He began to envision that the rock must be suffering terribly and wondered why the sculptor would inflict so much pain on it. Then, as he continued to watch, he saw the figure of a graceful dancer emerging gradually from the rock.

Nouwen realized that he had spent a great deal of his life building a protective rock wall around his heart. He also realized that every time he overcame his fear and chose to be grateful, he felt as if one of the stones had been removed from the wall. It hurt a little every time a stone of resentment was pulled out. But as he became aware of the presence of God's hands working on him, Nouwen also began to realize that his life and everything in it was a gift calling for gratitude.

Today is the Third Sunday of Advent.

It's a time for rejoicing.

It's a time when we take a break from the worrisome work of preparing for the coming of the Christ child and remember to be thankful.

This Sunday is sometimes called Gaudete or Rose Sunday. Gaudete means rejoice; it comes from the first words of the opening antiphon of the Medieval Latin mass. Some of us use rose colored candles in our Advent wreaths to mark the occasion.

I invite you to take on a practice of gratitude this week.

Just take a moment, maybe as you are lighting the rose colored candle in your wreath, and recall several things from the past day for which you are thankful. It might be something that comes to you quickly – like getting something important done, talking to an old friend, or playing with your children. But, it might be something that comes to you more slowly – like the warmth of the sun, the color of the sky, or the taste of a meal.

Sit with these memories. Savor them as you might the first taste of your favorite food. Enjoy them until you feel a growing sense of openness and appreciation.

Say the words “thank you” like a prayer.

The thirteenth century German mystic, Meister Eckhart, said, “If in your lifetime the only prayer you offer is thanks that would suffice.”

I'm thinking, “If you know this prayer, you're good!”

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

Amen,