

Rejoice, Pray, Thank

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, Luke 17:11-19

October 10, 2010

I.

Thank you very much. I'm grateful. We appreciate it. These are things we usually say to people who help us in some way, or do something nice for us.

But look at today's Gospel reading. Jesus healed ten lepers and only one bothered to come back and thank him. It might make you wonder if Jesus briefly was tempted to revoke the healing with which he blessed the other nine. I'm sure that he would not do that, but it certainly could have been a natural human reaction.

Some people still treat Jesus the same way today. Even though they say they are Christians they don't seek a relationship with him. They might come to church for reasons other than worship. And sometimes we all focus on wanting Jesus to give to us rather than giving back to him.

This is good sermon material. Preachers frequently bemoan humanity's ingratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. But I'm not going to go into it any further today. Instead, I want to speak of the uplifting message in the New Testament reading from First Thessalonians. And we will see how Paul's words are entirely different from the indifference of the nine lepers.

II.

This New Testament reading is a short but inspiring passage that begins on page 3 of your bulletin insert, and opens with the rousing word "rejoice." Let me read parts of it again.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Isn't that a wonderful passage? It virtually overflows with encouragement, hope, and comfort. And when we encounter our own problems and difficulties, Paul's words call us to look for the spiritual silver linings inside the dark clouds of life. And through faith we are assured that we will find these blessings.

On the lighter side of things this passage reminds me of the story about several elderly people at a nursing home sitting around and discussing their ailments.

One of them said, "My arms are so weak I can barely lift this coffee cup." Another said, "My cataracts are so bad I can't even see my coffee cup." A third complained, "I can't turn my head because of my arthritis," and another said "My blood pressure pills always make me dizzy." Someone else seemed to sum it all up when he said, "That's the price we pay for getting old."

There was general agreement, and then one of them broke into a big smile and cheerfully said, "Well, it's not really that bad, thank God we all can still drive!"

They all found reason to rejoice and give thanks in the midst of their difficulties, didn't they? We might be concerned if we saw one of them behind the wheel. But their optimism parallels a basic point in the reading. It is that no matter what difficulties we might encounter, we can trust that God's larger plan for our lives is trustworthy and righteous.

This, however, does not mean that our joy only is in the future. God wants us to claim the richness of his blessings right now. Paul made this point in most of his letters. Even though he

usually was writing to a persecuted or wayward church and urging them to look beyond their hardships of the moment, he also proclaimed the joy of the moment that is found in Christ's love.

III.

And you probably have heard that before. It's basic Christian teaching. The New Testament, of course, consists entirely of Christian teachings. Is there anything special about this one?

For me it is special because it seems to apply to virtually everything in every circumstance in which I find myself. It's one of those passages I have marked in my Bible, and quickly can find on my computer.

It's encouraging and supportive when I'm tired or weary, or infrequently downhearted. It reminds me of the true source of my blessings when I feel good about something. And when things just seem to be normal I can turn to this reading and inwardly smile at God's grace.

A recent best-selling book has been written by Suzy Welch, and it's titled "10-10-10." It came to mind as I was contemplating this reading and realized that today is October 10, 2010. The book is offered as guidance for making important decisions in life, and suggests that it is useful to consider what those decisions will mean in ten minutes, in ten months, and in ten years.

Her book does not include God in her theory, but what if it did? And what if we looked at today's reading from First Thessalonians through the same filter. What would happen if we rejoice, pray, and give thanks for ten minutes, and for ten months, and for ten years?

One of the conclusions in Ms. Welch's book is that in many cases the same decision is good for all three time periods. Today's reading works the same way. Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Those are constant and eternal truths in an ever-changing world. And they not only are instructions, but also promises.

IV.

So let's look at those three truths and consider how they can be active in our lives. And we know that Paul was a realist. He did not expect people to apply his words in rigid and strict ways that produced absurd results.

He said to rejoice always. Obviously that thought should be understood in context. We did not rejoice two weeks ago when the Saints lost in overtime. And how do we feel when we get a discouraging medical diagnosis? Where is the joy in that? How can we rejoice always?

Paul's writings make clear that in the long-term he was speaking of a continuing attitude of inward joy flowing from what God has done in Christ, and has offered to all who believe. He wanted people to know that our Christian hope in salvation does not change because of worldly circumstances. It comes from God and is constant.

And in the short-term we can rejoice knowing that we are God's children and the beneficiaries of his love. We will have blessings in abundance (1 Cor. 9:8). Our burdens will not be more than we can bear, and he will show us the way through difficulty (1 Cor. 10:13). And in the end we know that all things work together for our own good according to God's purposes (Ro. 8:28).

Then Paul said to pray without ceasing. Certainly he did not mean to always be in a physical posture of prayer. Rather, he was describing continuing communication with God based on the content of our hearts, which always is known to the Holy Spirit. He called us to be in an ongoing relationship of talking to and listening to God.

Something else in today's reading applies to prayer. Paul said not to quench the Spirit. The Holy Spirit came into the world to lead us in the ways Jesus taught, and to impart spiritual gifts to us. We receive these blessings from the Spirit in prayer, and the Spirit through prayer will show us God's will in our lives.

And this can mean that our very lives also can be a prayer. Even though we stumble from time to time, we can approach each day as though everything we do in the world also is offered to God in spirit. In this way we can place God at the center of our relationships.

But Paul's words were not limited to passive or indirect ways to talk to God. We also are called to intentionally pray regularly during the week and with each other in church. And these can include prayers of thanksgiving.

This leads to the next step. Paul said to give thanks in all circumstances. Again, we literally cannot be thankful all the time for all the consequences of living in this broken world. There certainly has been sadness at St. Thomas recently, and sometimes we say, "Why, God?" rather than "Thank you, God."

But we always can hold a sense of thankfulness in our minds for the gifts and blessings we enjoy in our lives. And we know that all that we have, and all that we have accomplished, is ours by God's grace. For these blessings, in Paul's words, we give thanks in all circumstances.

V.

There is one final point, implicit in this reading, that also should be made. This letter to the Thessalonians, as was the case with many of Paul's letters, was written to the church. In addition to preaching the Gospel, Paul also started new churches as he traveled about on his missionary journeys. And he followed up with them by sending letters offering instructions and advice.

And so we read hear Paul's words not only as guidance we can take to heart personally, but also as a model for our common life at St. Thomas. We want to grow and reach into the community. We want to teach and support our youth. And we want to care for each other. This reading gives guidance for our own lives as it also tells us how to be in Christian fellowship with others.

I believe we are a joyful church, a praying church, and a thankful church that relies on the Bible and follows the Holy Spirit. As we express those attitudes and actions through our lives and through the church, we will be doing what Paul asked the Thessalonians to do, and in the process we truly will be loving God and our neighbor. *Amen.*