

PASTORAL PRAYER

On this third Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves eager at the future to come. Christ our Lord comes into our earth once again with power and authority masked with the humility of a child. As the friends he called to walk in his footsteps, we pray for the wisdom and power to do the same. We pray to speak words and do deeds of power truly in your name with the humility to consider ourselves no higher than the neighbors that cross our path. On this day, we lift these ideals as we lift all on our hearts in prayer. Although we exemplify the joy you have given us, we cannot deny the weights of sorrow and difficulty this world brings. We pray for the brokenness of our world and the brokenness within ourselves. We pray for our friends who suffer from ill health and the ill health of mind and heart around the world. Hear our pleas that recognize our joys and our pains. Listen to our celebrations and our tears, as we enter your house with souls bared to you, our Gracious Creator. Oh Lord, as we lift them up, hear our prayers, and guide us to serve faithfully.

Gracious God, we spend too much time in your house thinking about rules, right behavior, and everything that is wrong with our world. Indeed, these are our calling to contemplate, Holy God, for there is much work to be done to free the captive, to right the wrongs of injustice. We spend too much time putting ourselves in your place in trying to control or worry about everything we cannot control. God, we ultimately focus too much on the negative without looking so much at the goodness of the world; we waste too much time living without joy. We pray all these things in the name of the one coming very soon, the one we anticipate with joy, the Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

SERMON

Just the other day, Catherine and I went to do the six-month evaluation for Willoughby. We meet with the regional director of Guide Dogs; her name is Lauren. As we talked through Willoughby's mannerisms, one thing we kept getting back to: he is highly excitable by strangers. Lauren's suggestion was to put him on a no stranger pet policy for the next month. Her main reason? This month is a month of great stress, and dogs have a way of taking on the mood of people. The way that he gets overexcited can easily be exacerbated by the negativity of others, and it can have some pretty detrimental effects on his long-term socialization. With a guide dog, how they relate to people is everything, so we are trying to take that advice in full. Willoughby's on a no pet policy until January, when everyone calms down and gets back to real life.

As I walked away from that conversation, I wasn't surprised by what she said. I didn't disagree with it, but I was highly saddened. If anything, this season of light should pass to the dog as further excitement, not stress; it should be enlivening, not negative. This is not the season of wonder; it is the season of anxiety and pressure. Everywhere you go, everyone's in more than a hurry to get things done. I have to check off all these things on the agenda or Christmas will be horrible. I have to do this and this; otherwise, people won't be excited, and the holiday will be ruined! I must control and dictate of all these things or everything will crash and burn and life will end and the stock market will crash and nobody will love me and the Packers will win the Super Bowl! Never do we realize that, wow, the holiday's already miserable trying to dictate Every. Little. Thing. Is this truly abundant life? Is this truly the message of Christ's birth and this season we find ourselves in? Is there really joy here? The answer is loud and clear: no. There is no joy here whatsoever, and that's one very large problem. Time to turn the bus around.

Today marks the third week of Advent, the third week of preparation. We take time in this season to recognize the virtues that empower us to live with anticipation faithfully. We have observed hope and love. Today, we encounter another great virtue: joy. The message of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians is clear: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." It's so nice he said it twice. What does it mean to rejoice? It's all about where you are and what you're doing right now. It's all about a choice and our chosen focus. It starts inside and moves out, not the opposite.

Our first scripture lesson doesn't seem to have a lot to do about joy. What we have here is the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry. He has all kinds of people coming to him seeking answers, and they aren't exactly the most upright of citizens: tax collectors, Roman Soldiers, self-righteous religious folks. And let's be honest, in that day in age, these were considered the scum of the earth. There were few more liable to abuse their power and everyone they possibly could. He doesn't greet them with a lot of courtesy. I believe he refers to them as a "brood of vipers." They are convicted. "What shall we do?" they all say.

John's not without compassion; he takes their concerns and answers with straightforward solutions. As the podcast Sermon Brainwave puts it, he doesn't say, "Go out and change the world all by yourself!" He doesn't say, "Quit your jobs and become devout monks!" His solutions are brilliant because they can be done exactly where they are. They are commands to do well and to be content in their own station. He doesn't tell the tax collectors NOT to be tax collectors, even though, in that day in age, they were considered the scum of the earth. Even the Roman soldiers, the occupying force of the Promised Land, he told "don't extort, and be satisfied with your wages." Essentially, he says, "For God's sake, clean up your acts and show that you are truly human beings." Be

satisfied. It's not based on station but on action; easily they could say, "We belong to Abraham, so we're cool, right?" Indeed not; it's not showing through their lineage but their actions that they follow. This is the new test of following God.

I would submit, therefore, that John the Baptist is telling the people to be joyful in their own right and in their own place, especially these people with power over others. There's an old saying that you can tell a lot about someone in how they treat their inferiors in status. You may not be able to change the greater system all by yourself, but you can do a lot in the here and now. Yeah, their jobs may stink, but other things can be done than their offensive ways. After all, there's a lot these tax collectors and soldiers can do to get ahead in life with extorting from others of lower status; they could easily get richer by collecting more than they are supposed to and pocket the rest. But John says to be content and treat your inferiors like neighbors, not objects. Look at the here and now not with control but appeal to a greater authority. In other words, be content and joyful in your current circumstances, controlling only what you can.

This is the underlying message of Paul's supplication to the Philippians. It is the calling to be joyful in our circumstances, no matter what, because there is a lot of garbage in the world, and we cannot control it. And why? Because "The Lord is near!" Joy and rejoicing are the underlying undertones of expectation, and the fruits of which are soon seen afterwards. Be gentle to everyone. Don't worry about anything. Let prayer and thanksgiving be your alternative, and turn back to the One who is in control. Then the peace of Christ will be among you.

What do these things have in common? They speak of control that we should and should not have. Control is either one of the scariest or most addicting things ever.

Realistically, we're put in an interesting position by scripture: We are to take control of certain things and then let go of control. What we usually do is ignore what we can control, and we try to take control of everything we cannot. Lemme explain. We easily fall into the trap, "I must make sure that everyone has a merry Christmas! Let me make sure that you have a merry Christmas! I can make this happen for you and everyone!" But we can't control others' experiences. On the other hand, we can control ourselves; we must personally choose joy, and leave all those things we cannot dictate aside. I can choose to be joyful, but I cannot control your ability to rejoice. I can be joyful and spread my joyfulness, though. We can choose joy, but when we try to make everything outside of us create our joy, it doesn't happen. It starts where God starts: on the inside. There's an old parable about a young boy who goes to his grandfather and tells him that he has such an inner struggle. There is a fight going on deep inside him between, as he calls them, two wolves. One is bitter anger, resentment, sorrow, self-doubt, superiority, lying, and ego. The other is full of goodness, joy, serenity, peace, compassion, and empathy. The grandfather tells him that this is not special; it is a fight which goes on in every person. He asks his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" and the grandfather responds, "The one you feed." We continually choose joy, and joy within us grows.

It's God's invitation to us today and always: joy is a choice. God offers joy freely, but God does not force it upon you. God does not overpower you to make you joyful; God does not overpower you to make you full of faith or wise or loving. They are all choices which grow with exercise. The offer is to choose them daily, moment by moment; otherwise, you feed the bad wolf of negativity and unfaithful control. Advent and Christmas go downhill very quickly because we are looking for happiness over joy.

And there is a strong difference between joy and happiness. Despite the way they are often described, they certainly aren't the same thing. Happiness is of the moment. Happiness comes from the outside. Things can give you happiness, but happiness has no staying power. It goes away just as quickly as it comes. Joyfulness, on the other hand, comes from within. You can't get joy from the outside because God works on the inside. Joyfulness gives us hope in some of the most hopeless situations. Joy can coexist with some of the worst emotions we can feel because joyfulness doesn't mean that we are always excited and smiling. You can be unhappy, you can mourn, you can be in the pits of despair and still claim joyfulness deep down because joy knows that every night has a dawn and that God will triumph at the end of the day. Joy is from God, and joy has a deeper root than happiness. Joy is not happiness. One is from God; the other is of the moment.

This takes particular meaning in this season. We await the Christ today; in anticipation is much joy recognizing the Christ's coming as a holy event, but happiness and joy can easily be confused. Key example this season: what I don't really understand is why some insist others saying "Merry Christmas" over everything else. I'm just happy people send me well wishes. With what we know about joy, what does this attitude say? In other words, which wolf are we choosing? When these things make us angry, it's a conversation that neglects the heart of joy: uplifting and gentleness toward everyone, as the Apostle Paul tells us. It's more about happiness to me; it's trying to create joy when joy comes from within. On the other hand, I think the idea is a challenge to us. It's our choice: if we want a Merry Christmas, it's our job to make it so. If we live with the joy of Christ, we don't need "Merry Christmas" to be said; we will live it. We try to make the world make us joyful when we must choose the joy from God. That's how the true joy of the season works.

You know what? A lot in the world stinks. It just plain stinks. Turn on the news, and you'll see a load of it. Sometimes our health isn't what it should be. Sometimes things don't come together the way we want or desire. There's a lot we don't want. We will be sad and negative from time to time. Nevertheless, we are called to rejoice, because for as much out there is horrible, there is still so much that is a blessing from God. It's not a denial of all the garbage in the world; it's recognizing that every time of sorrow is momentary, but God's blessings and calling are longer and greater than a season. In the midst of everything we cannot choose, we still can choose joy because each moment, each day, each year is not worth wasting with all the stuff we cannot control. Thanks be to God for this amazing choice! Amen and Amen.