

Sermon

Dec. 17, 2017

Third Sunday in Advent

Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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Through this season of Advent, I've been referring back to the story of the prodigal son to talk about the journey toward home. The season of Advent is sort of like being on a journey toward home. For some of us, we will literally be going home to mom and dad's house. For some of us, the journey home is a journey of memories of our childhood. For most of us, we are on the journey home in the sense that we are moving toward the time when our family or friends gather together to experience our holiday traditions. Coming home for Christmas is something many people look forward to this time of year.

Our Advent journey began two weeks ago. On that Sunday I talked about how the prodigal son realized being home with his father was better than being stuck with this mess. It wasn't just the feeding of pigs as a hired hand. It was a life that he had thrown away. He had lost so much. He had so many regrets. He was lost and alone. He knew life had to be better back home with his dad. So he decided to head back to home. He still had his regrets. He still had his issues, his mess. But he was heading home, which was a good thing.

Just so, we find ourselves in a messy world that we wish God would come down and fix. Of course, we are not responsible for the entire mess. Be we still have done our part to mess up the world in which we live. Rather than sitting in the mess, the better action is to acknowledge the mess we are in and decide to look to Jesus, live our lives as Jesus lived, walk in Jesus' steps toward our true home.

Last week we moved closer toward home. I talked about how the prodigal son cut through his shame, doubt, regret, and stayed focused on the right thing to do which was to make a path toward home. In the same way, we are challenged to cut through the mess in which we live,

the confusing jungle of this world, and create a path toward home. As we do this we discover that God is right behind us, guiding us day by day as we do the right thing. We can clear a path in the world to make room for God to walk through as we make our way through life.

Today, as we begin the third week of our journey, we can see home from a distance. It is right over the hill. The prodigal son has been seen by his father who happened to have been scanning the horizon. His father runs to his son and embraces him, full of joy that his son is back. At that moment, it no longer mattered what his son had done, the mistakes he made, the mess that was his life. All that mattered was that he was home with his dad. It was a time to rejoice.

Today is a day of rejoicing. When we light the advent wreath shortly the pink candle will be lighted. We light the pink candle to mark this day of rejoicing. The scripture given us to hear this morning begins with “rejoice always.”

Maybe you were like me when I heard “rejoice always.” Maybe you said to yourself, “Always? Even in times of tragedy? Come on.” How can we rejoice when we are sad or afraid or even angry? There are times of hardship and tragedy in which rejoicing does not seem possible. What’s to rejoice about when your world is falling apart?

Earlier this week, I met the plumber at our house to take care of a little issue. When he was getting ready to go he wished me “Merry Christmas.” He said he felt he could do that because he saw our Christmas tree and saw this saying I have in a picture frame that says “I am a child of God.” So, he said he assumed I was a Christian and that it would be o.k. to say “Merry Christmas.” I said, “Yeah, you figured me out.” He told me that the past few days he has dealt with a lot of grumpy people. He wasn’t sure if they wanted to hear “Merry Christmas” from him. He hadn’t seen a lot of Christmas spirit lately. I was glad we could share a little Christmas spirit right then. I hoped that he had more joyful people to deal with the rest of the day. You know, maybe the plumber had been dealing with grumpy people lately because they were angry about their plumbing problems. But maybe it

is the stress of the season, the shorter days, the lack of sunlight that makes people grumpy. Maybe you have been a little grumpy lately. And then you come in here and are told to rejoice always. How can anyone be up and cheery all the time?

But maybe rejoicing doesn't mean the same as being happy and chipper. No one can be happy all the time. But is it possible to rejoice all the time? I think so because rejoicing is not a passing feeling. It is something that goes deeper.

If you look at a concordance of the Bible, the word "happy" or "happiness" does show up in several places. But "joy" or "rejoice" is found everywhere in scripture. There's over fifty times the word shows up just in the Psalms. It is scattered all through the prophets. Jesus talked a lot about rejoicing. Paul talked lots and lots about rejoicing. Happiness...not so much.

Being happy and being joyful are not the same thing. To me, being happy is a feeling that comes and goes depending on my mood or the situation. When the sun is out after many days of cloudy skies, I'm happy. When I glance over the dessert table and see pecan pie, I'm happy. Joy is something deeper. The source of joy comes from the depths of our soul. In fact, it has been my experience that joy emerges most powerfully during times of sorrow, stress and disappointment.

Several years ago, I was serving a church that was a bad match. It was awful. I felt like a failure. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a pastor any more. I was hurting. But then at annual conference we gathered for opening worship. We were not one minute into the first song when tears started streaming down my face. I was not overcome with happiness. I was still sad. The pain was still there. But when worship started, and voices were lifted up in song, I was overcome with joy because the music reminded me that I still belonged to God, that I was still loved, in spite of the disappointment, sorrow and doubt. I was still a child of God, no matter what. Claiming that truth unleashed joy from deep within.

Take note of 2 Cor. 6:8-10. Paul is talking about his experience as a missionary. He writes, “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed.” Wow, that sounds pretty tough and discouraging yet hopeful in spite of all the struggle. Now hear this, picking up at vs.10, “As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.” See, Paul carried a lot of sorrow while always rejoicing. He wasn’t always happy. In fact, he could be downright angry. But he was also always rejoicing. How is this possible?

Being sorrowful and rejoicing at the same time already sounds impossible, but that’s not the only impossible task Paul talks about in the passage we heard this morning. We were told to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Wow. That does not sound easy.

I guess in a bad situation you can at least say to yourself, “I’m thankful that things aren’t worse” or “people have it worse off than I do so I can be thankful for that.” But I don’t know if that makes things better, to be thankful that others have it worse than you. Sure, your loved one could have a worse cancer than she has, and you can be thankful for that, but it’s still cancer and that’s nothing to be thankful for.

And pray without ceasing? I would run out of things to say! God doesn’t want to hear me talking all day. And how am I supposed to pray when I’m asleep?

There’s too much to unpack here in these three directives that Paul gives us. I will tell you that in January I am going to lead a class on prayer and I encourage you take it. We are going to talk about what prayer is and practice different ways of prayer. You might discover that life itself is a kind of prayer. Be looking for more info soon.

So what about this giving thanks in all circumstances business? Well, let’s think about this. When the father had his prodigal son back you better believe he was thankful. Was he thankful when his son was gone? I don’t know. But it is clear that the only thing that mattered in

that moment was that his son was back. He was so thankful to have his son in his arms. Maybe this is what it means for us to be thankful in every circumstance. We can be thankful that God is with us to guide us and encourage us in every circumstance. We can be thankful that we are never alone or without help. We can be thankful that we are always in God's embrace in every circumstance.

When the prodigal son's brother didn't join the celebration, his dad said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate *and rejoice*, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." Sometimes we feel lost. Sometimes we feel dead inside. But I want you to know that you are not lost to God. The one who is full of compassion and mercy is always with us, no matter what, and for this reason alone we can give thanks in every situation and rejoice always.

So it's ok to feel sad, to lament. There is a lot of lamenting that goes on in the Bible as well. And there is plenty to lament about in these days. We all know what it is to lament from time to time, to feel the weight of loss and regret. There's nothing wrong with that. I would say it is better to lament than to feel nothing at all. It is better to be sad than to be jaded and cynical. It's even ok to be lost and confused. Life is confusing! Just hold on to these words that Paul wrote, "May the God of peace keep your spirit, soul and body sound and blameless. The one who calls you is faithful, and he *will do this*." God is always calling out to us, God is faithful, God embraces us, God even rejoices in us. That's what God does. And we can too.

I want to close with one of my favorite scriptures. It is from the prophet Habakkuk. I'll give you a dollar if you can grab a Bible and turn to Habakkuk in 30 seconds or less. He sang these words many centuries ago: "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet *I will rejoice in the Lord*; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,

and makes me tread upon the heights.” Whether we are full or empty, ready or not, Christmas is coming. We are almost home. So let us rejoice in the Lord and be thankful that we are held in God’s embrace.