

Third Sunday in Advent
December 16-17, 2023
Life is Hard!
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice Always. That can be hard. Rejoice when the doctor says the cancer is back? Rejoice when the world seems to be coming apart at the seams? Rejoice when depression, loneliness, and addiction take over?

Romans 5:3 says, "...we rejoice in our sufferings...", that can seem; unreasonable, unrealistic, and even unimaginable. But Paul's letter to the Romans and the Thessalonians, our lesson today, helps us understand this in a truer, more steadfast way for our spiritual well-being today.

While it's always hard, it isn't dependent upon us to rejoice in the suffering itself, but rather in that which never disappoints us and never will. Because we rejoice and pray at every opportunity in light of the very truth, in the midst of that suffering, that never disheartens or deceives us.

Have you ever had that buddy, or dear friend that seems to enjoy suffering? Now, I am not talking about the person that is never happy unless they are unhappy. We all know who that is in our particular circle of friends. No, this is the friend that just seems to thrive and enjoy the fight, a good argument, or seems to be the one smiling joyfully in the midst of chaos.

I have had a few friends like this in life. One was when I was in high school, and he was the type the really enjoyed good, old, healthy fisticuffs. I mean the stand toe-to-toe confrontation where they would punch it out until one or the other was no longer left standing. I never saw one of those fights, but I was told he could be seen smiling when the fists were flying. I was just grateful he considered me a friend and even stuck up for me if others were making fun of me or picking on me for no good reason.

I had another friend, a pastor, who confided in me one time that he enjoyed thinking up ways to stir up the other pastors and argue with them when we got together for our circuit meetings. That finally explained to me why fights were always breaking out in our winks in those days.

But my favorite of all these crazy sorts was Craig, who was in my high school youth group and later a young adults' group that Marcy and I participated in shortly after we were married. Craig loved chaos. In fact, he did not feel like a retreat was a success until something cataclysmic happened, that we would all tell glorious tales of for years to come!

One trip in particular, we had rented a houseboat for a waterskiing, fishing, snorkeling and sunbathing “*retreat*” on Lake Powell. Needless to say, Craig was already looking for some chaos and this trip would not disappoint him.

It was not uncommon for windstorms to whip up on Lake Powell with little to no warning at all. They would not have been much of a problem if we were inside the houseboat with the hatches battened down. But we never were. We were always on the water, in the water, on the beaches, or fishing. Even at night we slept on the roof of the boat instead of inside. So, if a storm came, it would catch us outside and unprotected from the elements. And, add to that, all our gear, our towels, and clothes were usually hanging loosely on the rails of the houseboat. They were certain to be cast into the lake, scattered over thousands of acres of barren land or open lake, and either certain to be lost or take hours to search out and recover.

Well, as you can imagine, a storm did whip up unexpectedly one day and it was a doozy. Winds were in excess of 40 MPH. The boat was so buffeted by the wind it dislodged the anchor and the boat began to list toward the beach. Towels, snorkeling and fishing gear, clothes and toiletries were instantly flying all around us in a whirlwind and everyone was screaming frantically, trying to secure anything they could get their hands on.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Craig in a canoe out on the water paddling over the waves toward the listing houseboat. Like a Lakota Sioux warrior, he was screaming at the top of his lungs, “Adventure, Yeaahhhhhh!”

Thankfully, no one was hurt, but I am certain Craig was the only one completely unconcerned about his safety in the chaos. Because while we all had a look of terror on our faces, Craig was smiling from ear to ear loving every minute of it.

It’s so easy to read this lesson today and take away from it that we must mimic these erstwhile friends of mine and truly enjoy the pain, suffering, and the chaos that life has to offer us.

God tells us today that we don’t have to enjoy the pain, suffering, and chaos of this life, but, if God allows it, or even desires it...it isn’t bad for us. Hebrews 12:5-6, which quotes Proverbs 5, Job 5, and Psalm 119; says, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the man he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.” Listen to Luther’s sobering voice on this same passage, “If so many judgments, pains, deaths, chastised, are fatherly rods and loving chastisements,

what will be the wrath of the judge over the ungodly? And if His judgements begin at the house of God, what will be the end of those who do not believe the Gospel?”

(AE 11:467-68)

It just may be the cancer returned is a loving and reproving from God. The world coming apart seems “painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” we learn in Hebrews 12:11. And it even may be that God sees your loneliness, depression, and addiction ready to “lift your drooping heads and strengthen your weak knees, and make strait paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” as we learn from Hebrews 12:12-13.

When we walk together as members of this church, we care for and protect each other, just as God intended in this temporal life. And the Lord gives us what we need to accomplish that. So, those who are weak, like the one with a sprained ankle, must be supported by the rest, like an ace bandage until they are strong enough to walk on their own again.

The Holy Spirit works though all of this, by means of the proclamation and teaching of the Gospel in church and the administration of His Holy Sacraments. These concrete and visible means are the very vehicle the Holy Spirit uses to come amongst us where we need His guidance and strengthening of faith the most. And the Holy Spirit inspires the individual members of the church to do amazing things they otherwise would never have thought to do. So, we do well to remember the power of God’s Word to accomplish what He set it forth to do and the usefulness of His Holy Communion, Absolution, and Baptism to motivate people like we never could.

But we also must be wary of all that is evil and seeks to divide us and disrupt the proclamation of the Gospel among us and to those who have never heard of Jesus love for them. We do well to remember that anything that contradicts the faithful confession of the reformers over 500 years ago must be eradicated from our midst lest it compromises the truth we proclaim. Any contradiction to the Holy, Inspired, Inerrant Word must be called out for the heresy it is as the corruption of God’s Word we must never tolerate. Finally, anyone who may even whisper that our Lord’s Death and Resurrection was insufficient for the salvation of our souls and we must do something to earn that salvation, must be pushed out from among us as a false prophet and purveyor of falsehood.

Paul makes it clear...push them away, abstain from all evil, clear it from the library shelves, make your confession clear and founded only in Christ. Then, and only then, are you in the One who can and does always rejoice and pray unceasingly without error. Then and only then, are you in the One who never ever quenched the Spirit, whom He sent to give us what we

need to be the church and make the church His church for everyone. Then, and only then, are you in the One who prophesied without agenda, without sin, without error, and without exception, telling us what we forever needed in the future.

For He is the only one that can forgive our sins and restore us spirit, soul, and body, making us blameless in His sight before He comes to carry us home. He is faithful and we know and believe He will do it.

YES, Life is Hard. No one is going to cheaply flatter you or tell you what you want to hear at this church, but we will always tell you what you need to know.

Life is Hard, but our Lord is harder and more faithful than any difficulty the Devil may cast your way. And His walk to the cross, and His walking out of the grave proves it every day. The hardest life ever lived was His life. And He laid it down the hardest way possible, to achieve the impossible for us - life everlasting with Him. Amen

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