

December 11th, 2011 3rd Sunday in Advent 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica, what we call 1st Thessalonians, is the oldest piece of Christian writing known to exist. Obviously that means it is also the oldest part of the New Testament. It is a very warm and pastoral letter, and its whole purpose seems to be that Paul is apologizing for not returning sooner, and explaining why he is delayed.

If you look in your bulletin you see a diagram giving a fairly literal translation of part of that reading and its structure:

Always Rejoice

Constantly Pray

In all circumstances give thanks

For this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you

The Spirit, do not quench

Prophecy, do not despise

Everything, test.

The good, hold fast

From every form of evil, abstain

This is uncommonly straightforward for Paul, who usually writes very complex sentences. I think these words speak to us more powerfully in this raw format rather than the more polished way we translate them. I want to take today's sermon time to focus on these verses.

The first three seem to form a unit - Always rejoice, constantly pray, in all circumstances give thanks; but what a strange combination to make. It is even harder to live. Are we really to give thanks in *all circumstances*? For *all things*? I for one would like to amend these words a bit - I will rejoice for most things and in most circumstances. That would be both practical and healthy. Perhaps we want Paul to say be sure to rejoice for all things that are *good*. Then these words are a reminder to us. But that is not what Paul writes.

Commentator Abraham Smith writes, "Paul certainly does not qualify the circumstances... Has Paul asked his church to do the impossible? Can a person face a fresh set of abuses every day and give thanks? Can a person rise above the psychic doubts

left by years of abuse at the hands of a parent and give thanks? Give thanks in everything!?" (New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 11, Pg. 733)

This is impossible until we consider two truths that lie behind Paul's thoughts. First, God is present in all of life. That is really hard to hear and believe, I know. There's too much needless suffering in this world. There's too much pain around to say that the God of love is there in all of it. When you're in the midst of pain, especially if it is pointless suffering, you want to cry out in rage at God. You beg to feel the grace and joy that a faithful Christian is supposed to feel in times like that, but it doesn't always come. I wish being a Christian and following the rules meant for sure that you would be happy and have a joyful life, but that isn't true.

Honestly I wish I had a better answer to this, but I don't. There are some fundamental assumption about life and how God should work that we easily make and unconsciously make, but they aren't true. I do, however, find truth in this poem by James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold
Wrong forever on the throne
But that scaffold sways the future
and beyond the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows
Keeping watch above God's own.
All I can say for certain in all of this is that God went to the
cross. I wish God would rescue us from pain, but he doesn't.

Perhaps that brings us to the second truth behind Paul's teaching. It is something we don't expect from church, but that we probably should. In the early days of the church people appear to have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit far more strongly than we do now. Some people have suggested that it was a special time and the Spirit was somehow extra-active in order to get the church started. But I don't think so. That would mean that God expects us to get by on some discount presence of the Holy Spirit for our lives. We then get the 40% off on the presence of the Spirit life.

No, the Spirit is as alive and active today as it was then. But one difference is true. The people of Thessalonica were

vividly aware of the Spirit's presence among them. Perhaps it was because their faith was so counter-cultural. They literally needed each other. They couldn't live separate lives six days a week like we do and then pretend to have Christian community by spending a couple hours together on a Sunday. Perhaps it was because Christian faith was new to them. There's no way to know for sure exactly what ingredients made up the dynamic Christian community in Thessalonica. One thing is sure- *faith* and *Christian community* was what they lived every day.

I believe that in recent decades the idea of a Christian culture has become seriously distorted. Some suggest that the idea of Christian culture was always a farce and was never helpful. I won't go that far, but I do believe that sometime since the end of World War II a sense of individualism has gripped our culture rather than a spirit of community. The church has allowed itself to become a provider of spiritual services to individuals rather than being the core community in its members lives. This is to our most serious detriment.

We should always work to break down ideas of individualism and instead seek to strengthen community in the Holy Spirit. We

don't do ourselves any favors if our attitude about church is that it is something we do on a Sunday morning. Church is the community that we live, and regular worship is just a part of it. We're all in this together.

It is up to all of us to have open hearts to the pushes and nudges of the Holy Spirit every day. Some things will be affirmations of what we already do. Some will be revolutionary changes. That is why Paul wrote: Everything, test. That is not the same as challenge everything, but it does recognize that the work of the Spirit isn't always going to fall into simple sweet little categories. When you're working with the Spirit you're dealing with a serious power. Loving yes, but almost frightening in its strength.

It's also up to us to be fluent in the language of our faith. Almost all of us know how to read, and we all have Bibles. There's really no excuse to be feeling that you don't know God's will or don't know what you should do, while at the same time feeling ignorant of the Bible's contents. Why not make use of the resources you have available?

Prayer of course goes along with this.

In many ways strengthening Christian community and growing in faith is getting easier and easier. Facebook, internet devotionals and Bible studies, and all sorts of things are opening new avenues of community for us. It is easy to be in contact with many people on a daily basis that wasn't possible before. Of course not everything is perfect, and we don't need to share every detail on Facebook as some people do, but the possibilities are endless. Some of the other Lutheran congregations in our conference are doing a lot of fun stuff online that we can learn from.

When the Spirit is present there is a new and exciting dynamic that is contagious. I'm not saying the Spirit is absent in our congregation. To the contrary, it is here. But it is a strength we could and should engage as fully as possible. There's no point in being skimpy with a good thing, especially as powerful and joy inspiring as God's presence.

May the Spirit of God be with you, and in ways that you can know its presence. May it lead you to always rejoice, constantly pray, and in all circumstances give thanks. Amen