

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 9, 2005
21st Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 4:4-7
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 23
Second Lesson: Philippians 4:4-13
Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14

Rejoice in the Lord

When you think about the times that you were most filled with joy in your life—when joy filled you from head to toe—what are the times you think of? If you are a child, do you think of a birthday party when you were looking at a table full of gifts that you just couldn't wait to tear into and open up? Do you think about a wedding day or birth of a child? You might all come up with something different, but I have got to believe that probably none of you here thought about times when you were submitting to injustice, disgrace and maltreatment, trusting in God in spite of facing it. We probably didn't think that being attacked for standing up for Christ is a time when joy filled us from head to toe. And probably none of us thought about the time we were thrown in prison for the sake of the Gospel because it has probably never happened to any of us.

But as Paul either wrote or dictated these words to someone else who wrote them down for him, if he was moving a pen across page, there might well have been a clank of chains as he wrote *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*—because he was in prison. And in this section of God's Word, he ties intimately to joy in the Lord—being willing to suffer injustice, maltreatment from someone else without hatred or responding in kind, just trusting in God in spite of it all.

Those aren't the kind of times that we think about rejoicing in the Lord, but God tells us this morning, the Holy Spirit, through Paul, tells us that we can rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances, no matter what they might be, and we can know that as we rejoice in the Lord and let this gentleness be known to all, God's peace will guard us and take care of us. That is his promise to us this morning.

When people ask me, "Pastor, where should I start reading in the Bible?" I usually encourage them to start with the Gospel, read about the life of Christ. Then maybe keep going in the Book of Acts and see what happened after Jesus went to heaven. But one of the books I usually suggest they read towards the start of reading through the Bible is Philippians because I just think it is an amazing book when you stop and think about it—that the apostle Paul, in prison for the sake of the Gospel, writes this letter that breaths nothing other than joy. Time and time again he talks about joy or rejoicing. It just is an amazing thing and it really tells us that no matter how smart we think we are, there are things that human understanding just will never get—things that have to be revealed to us by the Spirit. And one of them is that in the Lord, in the Spirit of the Lord, being connected to the Lord, we can rejoice always. We might not always do it, but the more we focus on the Lord and being in the Lord, the more we will find joy in our lives in spite of our outward circumstances.

Being in the Lord means that something has changed—there has been a drastic and radical change in us so that we can rejoice in the Lord. When we are born, we are not in the Lord. When we are born, we are in the image of our parents, who are in the image of their parents, who are in the image of all the way back to Adam. We are not born in God's image. We are not born holy and righteous. We are born sinners. We are born spiritually blind, spiritually dead and enemies of God. So the whole idea of rejoicing in the Lord by our own sinful nature is repulsive and repugnant. It is worse than fingernails being scratched along a chalkboard. It's something that we would want nothing to do with. So this drastic radical change has taken place so that in the Lord we are now connected to him through Christ's life and death. We have this ability, no matter what our circumstances are, to have joy. Joy that isn't just giddiness or isn't just happiness, but this state of calm trust that leads us to express joy no matter what circumstances we are in.

When we are in the Lord, then we imitate the Lord. It says to *Let your gentleness be evident to all*. Gentleness is a nice English word but it doesn't really encompass everything that is being talked about here. The same word is used of Jesus in Colossians and it talks there about his meekness. Gentleness and meekness together begin to suggest more of what this word is talking about because this word literally means a humble, patient steadfastness which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace, and maltreatment without hatred and malice.

Think about that for a minute. Are you good at that? When you are being mistreated by someone or when you are suffering injustice do you respond without hatred and malice? I don't always respond without hatred and malice. Someone cuts me off when I am driving and I get angry. I don't respond without hatred and malice and say, "That's just fine. Cut me off again sir". When we think we are being suffered wrong, what do we want to do? In our country, we want to get a lawyer and get a lawsuit and get money out of it and make someone pay for it. Even if we don't want to go that far, we certainly in our mind want to make someone pay that they are making us suffer maltreatment or injustice. That's how we are—the exact opposite of what this is talking about. Just like Jesus was quiet before those that were attacking him and he endured the cross scorning its shame as Paul had just talked about in Philippians a couple chapters earlier. He did it without hatred or malice. He did it saying, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" He did it suffering everything he had to endure—the very agony of hell on the cross—to pay for the sins of those that were killing him.

Let your gentleness be evident to all. Let your meekness, your considerateness, willingness to put others ahead of yourself and not being worried about how you are treated, but worry more about how you can serve others and keep trusting in God in spite of everything that you face. Let that be evident to everyone, God says. Because if we are rejoicing in the Lord, if we are focused on who he is and what he has done for us and we know that he is near, as Paul said, that his return is imminent, and as we talked about last week—don't set your mind on earthly things but on heavenly things because the Lord is near and this world is just here and gone for a time—as we do that and we let that gentleness—everything connected to that word—be evident to everyone, we are going to stick out like sore thumbs, aren't we, because it isn't in our nature. It isn't in the

nature of humans to do that. Remember as Christ did that, what did the centurion say? *“Surely this is the Son of God.”* Let your gentleness be evident to all. It’s not easy, but that is what God has called us to do. Even when we are suffering wrongly, continue to rejoice in the Lord.

How does he tell us to handle it when we are suffering unjustly? Our natural response to being suffered unjustly or having someone attack us unfairly would be to be worried about it, right? To be anxious—not anxious as that little kid with the presents that he can’t wait to tear into, not anxious in a good way—but anxious as in anxiety, as in worry, as in your stomach is twisted up in knots and you can hardly see straight because you are so worried and so obsessed with what it is that is bothering you. So when you are being mistreated, don’t be anxious about anything. If you are being mistreated, he tells us not to be worried about it. What does he say to do? *But in everything, by prayer and petition*—that sounds natural, doesn’t it? If you are worried about something, if you are worried about your health, if you are worried about a relationship, if you are worried about finances, isn’t it natural to say, “Lord, help me”. You send out kind of an arrow prayer, “Lord, help me out through all of this”. But did you notice what kind of prayer God talked about here. When you are worried, when your stomach is twisted up in knots, *by prayer and petition...present your requests to God—with thanksgiving*. Again, that is not natural is it? That goes against human understanding.

When you are worried is the first thing that you think of praying? If you face some kind of health crisis, do you pray, “Lord, thank you for sending this into my life” or do you say “Lord, get this out of my life”. It is obvious, isn’t it? But if we are rejoicing in the Lord and letting our gentleness be evident to all, God enables us to pray, “Lord, thank you for allowing this into my life so that I learn to rely more on you”. We might not pray that right away, but it is wise to start out praying, “Lord, I thank you for all that you have done for me in the past”. As we look at all the promises God has made to us and we fail to find a single one that he has broken, that helps with the worry now, doesn’t it? That takes some of that worry away. That takes the edge off the knot in your stomach.

It doesn’t seem natural. It goes against our understanding, but when we are worried, to pray with thanksgiving, thanking God for his past blessings and thanking him for the promises that are for the present and the future, God blesses us. It might not be natural to us, but it is natural to the new self that lives in us. It is natural to the Holy Spirit who is in us. So the more we are rejoicing in the Lord, the more we will do this and we will be able to rejoice in all circumstances—even when we are worried—because of God’s promises.

And now the result—because when he says, “Do this—*present your requests to God*” and then he continues on in saying, “*the peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds*”—that is a promise God is making to us. That is the result that he says is going to happen—that when we present our requests with thanksgiving, God’s peace will guard our hearts and our minds—literally our understanding. The same word that is used to say *the peace of God that passes all understanding*—it says God will guard our understanding. God will guard us is the picture of a soldier standing at a gate keeping guard over the city. The soldier at the gate would not only stand guard against an

enemy coming from outside the city, but the soldier would also stand guard and watch over what was going out from the city.

So the picture is that as we present our requests to God with thanksgiving, as we rejoice and let our gentleness be evident to all, the peace of God which goes against our understanding, which leads us to rejoice in all circumstances, is going to be there standing guard at our hearts (our emotions) and our minds (our understanding) so that he will help us to do what we are unable by nature to do—which is to rejoice in the Lord when things are going rotten, to not be worried but to pray with thanksgiving when things are eating away at us. God's peace will do this for us.

And again, you and I don't deserve it. You and I can't understand fully why God would love us so deeply when he tells us that he hates sin and he hates the sinner and at the same time he tells us, "I as a Holy God am also merciful and I sent my Son to live in your place and to die in your place. And all those times that you have worried instead of focusing on my promises, all those times that you relied on yourself instead of on me and rejected my Word and my promises, I still died for all of those." When we doubt that, we come now to his altar and he says, "This is the very body and the very blood that was poured out for all those sins that you have committed in these areas." He has loved us completely and absolutely and here is the tangible evidence for our, at times weak, doubting hearts.

Our God loves us. Our God is with us. Our God leads us to be able to rejoice in him even when it goes against our human understanding. How awesome is this place where we are reminded of this incredible truth.