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Advent 3 –1 Thessalonians 5:16-24  
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As the third Sunday of Advent this is historically the Sunday during Advent that is devoted to the theme of joy - reminding Christians that the Christmas message is, in fact, one of rejoicing. Within our specific Advent series we focus on let it be whole – rejoicing in God’s comfort, we catch God’s vision of shalom as we join the Spirit that is already at work.

This morning I have chosen for us to focus on this brief lectionary text from Paul to the church of the Thessalonians. It comes at the end of a very short letter and is often given the heading of final instructions. It kind of reminds me of the final reminders I give to my kids every morning before they get on the bus – be kind and courteous, be a good friend, listen and be respectful. In a response similar to my sons, I wondered if the church simply tuned out this message? I know, I know Paul, you don’t have to remind me. Again. However, interesting to note that this letter is believed to be Paul’s first letter, therefore we acknowledge that these are the final instructions in the earliest writing of the New Testament. And so, it is not same old, same old, *Mom*. But instead it is concise, thought through, and significant final instructions. How are these instructions relevant for us today in the midst of Advent?

This passage is structured that there is a set of three instructions, then a connecting phrase, before a second set of three instructions. Beginning in verse 16 Paul rattles off three quick, successive instructions – Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. One, two, three. Easy, right? Only three short, concise statements, let’s go and faithfully obey them! Well, maybe not quite that easy. Rejoice *always*? Pray *continually*? Give thanks *in all* circumstances? Maybe good old Paul would have benefited from an editor. Wouldn’t it have been easier if he had said: “Rejoice when life is going well. Pray when you

think about it or feel like it. Give thanks when there is something to be thankful for.” Paul, however, is addressing this faith body that is striving to be faithful followers of Jesus as they are also experiencing persecution for their faith. Their life is not just parties, cakes, and flowers. Their context, like our own, was filled with outside voices clamoring for their attention, and at times ridiculing them for their faith in Jesus Christ. It is to a faith community in this context that Paul leaves them with the final instructions – Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.

The final instructions are composed of three imperatives that prescribe specific actions of the faith community – rejoice, pray, give thanks. They are modified by words – always, continually, in all circumstances - which increase the intensity of the acts prescribed. Each of the imperatives also “convey a human response toward God, recognition that God is the source of our joy and thanksgiving.”<sup>i</sup>

This section is connected to the next section by the phrase, “for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” In the next section Paul continues with his instructions to not put out the Spirit’s fire, and to test and discern prophetic words. I make the leap to the second set of instructions as we can only faithfully live into the first set if we are mindful of the work of the Spirit within our lives as individuals and within the gathered faith body.

So, back to the first instructions, rejoice always. We must be reminded that joy is different than happiness. This does not say, as a Christian we should always be happy. There is no way to *always* be happy and to live a life of integrity. However, one is able to always retain joy and live a life of integrity. The joy that Paul speaks of is also listed as a fruit of the Spirit. This is not something that we have to manifest within ourselves. Instead it is a result, a fruit, of allowing the Spirit to be at work in and through us. Joy and happiness look very different. This

time of the year we sing Joy to the World, and while that message hopefully evokes some smiles and good cheer, it also permeates deeper than that to communicate God's redemptive plan unfolding amidst God's creation. For example, one author defined joy this way: "Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as (the Spirit) causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the word and in the world."<sup>ii</sup>

The second instruction is to pray continually. Perhaps you want to stop right there and just declare that this command is not even possible as how could one pray without ceasing? I would suggest that we consider ways to live into the spirit of this instruction with the help from the Spirit. I would encourage you to think of this instruction as asking that we grow in our awareness and dependence on God throughout our daily lives. How can you continue to weave an awareness of God throughout your day, making that relationship and communication with God be the central thread that holds your day together? For many of us we will need to consider new practices to help us to pray continually.

During this week of Advent leading up to Christmas, what if we all committed to incorporating two new prayer practices? Specifically, what if we each began every morning by saying good morning God, pausing to give thanks for a night of rest (no matter how short it was) and beginning the day by offering thanks for the gift of being able to greet it? And then what if the last thing we did before falling asleep at night was to pray the prayer of examen when we would walk back throughout our day and name the places we experienced God's presence? Two small actions of pray that can bookend our days and can begin to strengthen the central cord of communication with God.

The final instruction in the first set is "give thanks in all circumstances." I have heard this instruction be horribly abused and misused by well-meaning Christians. It is critical that we

grasp that the instruction says to give thanks *in* all circumstances, not give thanks *for* all circumstances. So, in the midst of deep pain, tragedy, broken hearts, broken dreams, war, injustice, and grief the instruction is not to stop and start thanking God for all of those things. Instead I would name it as an instruction to faithfully hold onto perspective. So Paul is saying to pause and to look up and beyond the circumstances that at times give us the sense of drowning and to again place our eyes on the Risen Christ. Then consider for what we may offer thanks for, as there is always something for which or for whom to be grateful.

The second set of three instructions begin in verse nineteen – Do not put out the Spirit’s fire. Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject whatever is harmful. Other translations offer the first instruction as do not quench the Spirit. This week I found myself imagining the Spirit as a fire. We have a wood burning fireplace in our home which we use as a supplemental heating source and I have learned that there are things we can do to help create the best environment for the fire to thrive. And I’ve learned that there are things we can do to obstruct the fire, or limit the possibility of it to continue burning (a key learning is opening the damper!). This week then I began to question, how do we do this to the fire of the Holy Spirit?

As I sat with this passage this week I came up with three of what I think are some of the most common ways we put out the fire of the Holy Spirit in our lives. First I would name we pour icy cold water on the Spirit’s fire when we look to everything and everyone else besides the Holy Spirit for guidance and discernment.

Imagine with me that you are facing a major or minor decision in your life or you are experiencing a difficulty. Perhaps you are considering a job change or being forced to consider a job change or are considering retiring. Or you are pursuing a relationship and trying to discern

the next steps. Or you have received a medical diagnosis and need to discern the course of treatment. Or you are deciding if it is time to upgrade the family car, or take that vacation, or expand your family, or buy a house. Or you are trying to decide which college to attend, or discern your vocational calling. Or you are trying to parent your newborn baby, your middle school student, your young adult child. Or you discerning how to engage in the social justice concerns that are close to your heart. When we find ourselves in any of those situations where is the first place we turn to for counsel or discernment? If we are facing a major decision, or even a minor one, or a significant difficulty, where do we go to for wisdom?

For many of us perhaps before we consider asking for the Spirit's guiding presence we have already turned to google, our best friends, or self-help books. Seeking the Holy Spirit is also intrinsically connected with the following instructions in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians all related to discerning prophecies. We live in a time when individuals are still declaring that they have received a prophetic word and we must seek the Spirit's help to discern if it is of God or not. During this liturgical season of the church we also revisit the prophecies from Isaiah, Jeremiah, as well as the prophecy found within Mary's song. In Advent we are reminded of what the prophets prophesied and our ongoing calling to help usher in this vision of the kingdom of God.

The second way I believe we work to put out the Spirit's fire is when we ignore its voice when the Holy Spirit is convicting us of sin. I would describe it as the times we sense the Holy Spirit nudging us and working within us to lead us into the ways of truth and righteousness. However, instead of heeding the Spirit's voice we silence the Spirit, ignore the convictions, scream above the gentle whisper of the Spirit, and then proceed to do what we want when we want it. We indulge our own desires even in the face of the Holy Spirit prompting us to obey, to turn away, to seek wholeness.

The third way I would suggest we throw a wet blanket on the Spirit's fire is when we sense the Spirit prompting us, inviting us, propelling us to join it in testifying of Jesus Christ and instead we remain silent. We rationalize, sometimes it feels like with a million reasons, why it would be better to just be quiet, to not stir up the waters, to refrain from using our voice or our lives to testify to the Advent of Jesus. In effect we say to the Holy Spirit, thanks but no thanks, we think this time we will just be silent. We will not speak up and speak out against racism, sexism, violence, abuse, injustice. We will not use our voice right now to proclaim hope, joy, salvation, and peace. We will quench the Spirit. We will silence its voice within.

Here we are in this season of Advent. This is the season of waiting, and the season of pondering again the mystery of Emmanuel – God with us. During this season I believe we are being called and prompted to work at ways of amplifying the voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Instead of putting out the fire, how might we add our own kindling so that the flames burn brighter? Paul would offer that to help the fire burn brighter we could rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, and test and discern the prophetic word.

Something else important to note is that these imperatives are all listed in the plural. In the earliest writing of the New Testament we see that Paul understood, clear back then, that being faithful to these instructions would only be possible within the gathered community, and it remains the same for us today. During this season of advent may we together rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, and do all that we can to not put out the Spirit's fire.

I want to leave you with a powerful quote from Carla Works, a New Testament Professor in Washington DC. I offer this quote as I believe it fully embodies the message of this passage as well as aspects of the sermon. Works writes this:

None of these admonitions (*of Paul*) result in a lazy or passive congregation. Paul ends the letter with action words that are God-centered...these activities leave no room for idleness, nor do they allow the church to forget the source of their good news (*during Advent*). Nonetheless, obeying these imperatives is only possible due to the power of the Spirit's work among them. The church today reads these final admonitions as we too await Christ's return... This period of waiting, though, is not a time to twiddle our thumbs. We are called to be active. Pray and rejoice that God has not abandoned us to evil. Model what is good and peaceful. Allow God's Spirit to shine in our midst for the God of peace is really at work among us.<sup>iii</sup> Amen.

So, this week of Advent leading up to Christmas may we lean in to Paul's final instructions to the Thessalonians. May we rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances. May we not put out the Spirit's fire but test and discern all prophetic word keeping that which is truth and letting go of that which is not. For this is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Carla Works, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*,

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3500](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3500)

<sup>ii</sup> John Piper, *How Do You Define Joy?*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-do-you-define-joy>

<sup>iii</sup> Works, *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*.