

17 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 23 – Year A – October 12, 2011 - Homily
Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
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I brought one of the tambourines that we made in children's chapel this Sunday with me tonight. Sounds good doesn't it? It's a reminder of at least one of the ways that we can "Rejoice in the Lord, always" as Paul commands. The children also had other ideas, like praise and worship, singing, shouting, jumping up and down, and dancing. It's a curious thing, but as we get older, we seem to forget how to be children before God, with all the freedom and exuberance of that age group. It's also a curious thing that we often shout, scream and jump around at sports events, but become much more reserved when we rejoice in the Lord. I wonder why?

Rejoicing in the Lord *is* counter-cultural in today's society. We have managed to make our joy a personal and private thing, mostly associated with feelings of happiness, or reserved for happy occasions like weddings and baptisms, perhaps even a new car, or that great promotion at work. Paul has a much more significant and profound view of joy. It's no accident that he uses the plural form of address throughout this reading. He's reminding the Philippians and us that real joy is found together in the community of Christ's Body. As a fruit of the Spirit, joy is a gift of God, not an end in itself, or something that we can achieve by ourselves. Nor can real joy be found in stuff, or the things of this world. As chaplain, Nathan Eddy, writes, joy "is an outcome and sign of the presence of the risen Christ [in our lives]... Joy is a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances." Similarly, joy is not an escape from the pain and struggles we sometimes encounter in life. However, staying joyful in the Lord, gives us a different, liberating perspective of our lives in all circumstances. Joy opens up new possibilities for us, because God is always working for our greatest good, and He always has the ability to surprise us.

In fact, it is truly surprising that Paul shares this joyful command to rejoice in the Lord for two reasons. The first is that he's writing this letter from a prison cell, hardly the epitome of happy circumstances. The second is that his fledgling community in Philippi is facing persecution, and even worse, the stress is clearly causing some internal conflicts. The first part of his letter responds to a disagreement between two of Paul's church leaders in Philippi. He urges Euodia and Syntyche "to be of the same mind in the Lord." We don't know what that was all about, but reminding us all to stick together when times are particularly tough is always good advice. The problem is that when we feel stressed or pressured, we often take it out on our closest and dearest family, including our family in Christ.

Paul makes four important points here. First, when we're stressed, we need to remember that the Lord is near, which is indeed a cause for celebration. We are never alone, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is always working for our good. Secondly, we're in this together, so forbearance or gentleness is called for, especially with one another. We don't always have to agree, nor will we, but we are commanded to love one another as Christ loved us. In other words, we have to love sacrificially by putting the needs of the other ahead of our own. Thirdly, prayer is essential to our discipleship. Prayer brings us into closer relationship with the Lord, and Paul tells us that God wants to be a part of everything in our lives. Finally, Paul tells us to focus on the goodness in our lives and in our community, and not to dwell on the negatives, or be caught up in petty bickering. This is all about our individual and community life as disciples of Jesus. Each element brings us closer to realizing and experiencing the surpassing peace of Christ Jesus our Lord. Each

of these disciplines of faith helps us to deal positively with all the stressors of life, and to maintain a sense of deep joy in relationship with God.

Our God is a God of peace. Peace is also a fruit of the Spirit and a gift of God. God yearns to free us from anxiety by sharing fully in our lives. “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice.” We have much to be joyful for in our lives, and in this community of faith. But finding peace in anxious times can be difficult for us. What is Paul telling us about the peace that only God can give? As always, the Greek is wonderfully nuanced. At one level, it means living in times that are free from the havoc of war. On a more spiritual level, it is harmony and concord between individuals. This may well be why he exhorts the two leaders to be of the same mind in the Lord, and reclaim the peace of God. The other side of God’s peace is intimately connected to our relationship in Him, and His providential care for each of us as beloved children. In that sense, it is a comforting sense of security. In faith, we know peace, because of the sure and certain hope of our salvation, and everlasting life in Him, despite the struggles of life.

If, as Paul encourages, we view any difficult circumstances from that perspective, in effect, nothing and no one can harm us. This is what the Psalmist writes from faith and trust in God, when they are under attack from enemies. In Psalm 118:6 we have a message of comfort in our faith, “With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?” In Jesus’ last prayer for His disciples from the Gospel of John, He says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). The calm center of a disciple’s life is our peace in Christ. While the storms blow all around us, we can find God’s peace in prayer, and change our viewpoint. As usual, it is a divine paradox that joy so often takes root amid life’s adversities. This is especially true when we stay grounded and centered in the Lord and practice our spiritual disciplines faithfully. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice!

Amen.