

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 14, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
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The millennial movie *Pay it Forward*, based on the novel by Catherine Ryan Hyde was basically slammed by the critics, at least according to the movie website, Rotten Tomatoes. However, audiences loved this movie. If you haven't seen it, the story is about a young boy who decides to change the world by adopting a kind of pyramid scheme. He helps three people and then encourages them to pay it forward by each helping three other people. Given the number of websites about real life "pay it forward" movements, I'd say that the movie critics were the ones who tried to quench the Spirit here, and lacked discernment. Sadly, like many prophetic voices, the life of the little boy in the movie comes to an untimely and violent end. Paul has something to say about both issues, as well as how to live into God's goodness in his letter to the Thessalonians.

This is the oldest epistle in the New Testament, and in tonight's reading, Paul offers some timely advice for us all about living joyfully, with thanksgiving, in all circumstances. According to Paul, it's God's desire that our lives be grounded in joy and thanksgiving. In fact, that's just another way of saying that we should "pray without ceasing". Our prayers are an offering to God, an opportunity to give thanks to God, and to discern God's will. At least one commentator suggests that the Thessalonians may have had a hard time giving thanks. We too can have a hard time being grateful, especially if we're going through a tough time. Paul's entire letter concerns wholeness and holiness, and he clearly believes that we cannot achieve either without a grateful heart. Despite the numerous adverts with happy families loving every moment of the season, living joyfully can be a real challenge at this time of year when the weather makes it difficult to get around easily, and when so many are having tough times emotionally, financially, or spiritually. Speaking personally, I've had a challenging week, but mostly because you, the people of this parish, have had an even more difficult week. At times like this, I know that I cannot function unless I spend time in prayer, and lean heavily on God. Martin Luther says it like this, "Tomorrow, I plan to work, work, from early until late. In fact I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

Paul's particular prayer for the Thessalonians is on how to become whole through godly living. In that respect, Paul's life ethic or way of being in the world is one of complete devotion to God. He firmly believes that a life pleasing to God is filled with joy, thanksgiving, and therefore with prayer. We must also recognize that it's only through God's faithfulness that such a life is possible. "The one who calls you is faithful," he says. We trust that to be true. We know and experience God's steadfast love, even during the most challenging of situations. Again, I can only speak for myself, but I've found in my own life that the promises of God are true. As it says in Philippians (4:13), I can do all things through God in Christ Jesus, who strengthens me. I can and do my best to offer God's unconditional love to others, because as John says in his first letter (1 John 4:19), God first loved me. I can comfort those who grieve and those who are suffering, because as Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console" others. I can give to others, because God has "given me every blessing in abundance" just as Paul writes to the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 9:8). I'm sure there is even more. The point here is that we can all do these things because we're filled with the love, joy, and

hope of God through our faith in Christ Jesus. We can do all this and more individually and as a community. This is what it means to be a Spirit-filled community of faith.

Paul specifically writes to the Thessalonians, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” A community marked by the stirrings of the Holy Spirit is a prophetic community. By that we mean a community who actively seeks to listen attentively and generously to the prophetic movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. A prophetic community also listens thoughtfully. The gift or *charism* that accompanies the gift of prophecy in community is the gift of discernment. We can quickly recognize if the Holy Spirit is being quenched. It can feel like energy is being sucked out of our ministries, or we will notice that there’s a loss of prophetic consciousness and care for our neighbors. On the other hand, a Spirit-filled community is vibrant, prayerful, and grateful. We share our spiritual gifts and resources freely, and reach out to our neighbors with love and compassion.

There are definitely times when the Holy Spirit comes like a rushing wind, knocking us off our feet, and musing up our ordered and orderly lives. That can be rather frightening and very uncomfortable. There are also times, when we must listen carefully for that still small voice. The Holy Spirit helps us to live our faith in hope and trust. In whatever way He comes to us, we can be sure that it is a sign of a prophetic and lively community of faith, one where we put our faith into action. We can also be sure that God is calling us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Advent is a good time to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. He prepares us to receive God’s great gifts through Jesus, our Lord, and He stirs us up from our comfortable lives in order to do God’s will. In faith and life, there are many ways to *pay it forward*. God has called each of us to love our neighbors as ourselves, but the greatest blessing is in sharing the gift of faith with others.

Amen.