

“Three Ways Forward”
November 24, 2024

Habakkuk 3:17-19
I Thessalonians 5:12-28

Thanksgiving approaches. And we hear:

Always rejoice.

Without ceasing, pray.

In all circumstances, give thanks.

Once again, we come up against the extremism of Paul.

And once again, we would beg to differ, thinking:

When life is good, rejoice.

When you have the time, pray.

When you get what you want, give thanks.

Much more sensible; much more realistic, don't you think?

Perhaps. But we might want to hold off on our judgments and let those words sink into our hearts. Let us follow along as Paul arrives at his astonishing and disturbing conclusion about how we should spend our time—*all* of our time.

Start by remembering how I send you out of here each Sunday. Our worship ends with the same words: “Strengthen the weak, support the faint hearted, return no one evil for evil, but in all things seek the good.” This charge is a paraphrase of Paul's words to the Thessalonians that we heard this morning.

Those words have become such a part of our common life that we printed them on the back of the church T-shirts several years ago.

And, you know, we *do* strengthen the weak and support the fainthearted—wherever we might find them.

A curious thing: Even those who have studied Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians thoroughly find it difficult to say just who Paul had in mind when he wrote about the weak and the fainthearted or how they showed their specific problems.

It's easy enough, isn't it, to think that we know who the “weak” or the “fainthearted” among us are, right? They are the ones not quite up to speed, the ones whom we might tolerate, but whom we would always approach from a position of strength and power.

Not so fast, Paul suggests. At some point all of us are weak and faint of heart. At some point, each of us needs support, and encouragement. That is to say, we need to love one another as Christ has loved us.

I know I need that kind of love when I find myself weak or fainthearted.

And, really, the support and encouragement that Paul recommends are not to be given to the weak and the fainthearted alone but to all members of the community.

Think about that. Can you see the beauty of Paul's insight into the nature of the church—even *this* church?

We all know, of course, that as important as the life of a congregation might be, as important as the life of *this* congregation might be, faithful people must also deal with life *outside* the church

A hurting world calls to us and we must respond.

A world of lies needs us to speak the truth.

A violent and warring world looks for peace and we must be among those who create it.

A hungry world waits for the food that we can offer.

So, we are told: "Always seek to do good to one another *and to all*."

Do you understand how radical those words are? To an early congregation that was besieged and constantly in danger, Paul counsels, not retribution, not returning evil for evil, but seeking the good in all things. This congregation receives the same counsel: seek the good.

It is not just our behavior toward one another that matters. We are also to be concerned with how we live outside these walls—seeking to do good to all. The love that should be shown within the congregation is also to be made evident outside the congregation.

You see, it works both ways. If we are going to be a faithful congregation, we must not only care for one another, we must also care for the world. If we are going to be a faithful congregation, we must not only care for the world, we must also care for one another.

It is in this context—speaking to a church that is sent out into the world—that we hear Paul's words that sounded so extreme.

First: Let us be a church that rejoices, a church that knows the joy of life in Christ.

Remember the teachings of the early Protestant reformers who confessed that the chief ends of humankind are to love God and to enjoy—that's right, *enjoy*—God forever.

From its beginning, the church has spoken a message of joy.

When Paul says—as he does here and elsewhere—"rejoice always," he's not talking about pretending that everything is all right.

Everything is not all right.

He's not talking about comforting ourselves with the thought that "It could be worse"—although it certainly could.

Paul is reminding us that in Jesus Christ all creation—including you and me—are loved and accepted by God.

This is the primary reason for our rejoicing, for our joy. We are not exempt from the problems and dangers of living. We recognize that tragedy can befall us; that we will know illness, anger, sorrow, and grief.

Through all our living, however, we are given the good news of God's loving presence with us.

We are invited by Paul to look toward the future that God promises, and together with each other be a people that rejoice.

A rejoicing community can also be a community that prays.

"Without ceasing, pray," Paul advises.

And we think, "Who's he kidding?" [We have to fix breakfast, get the kids off to school, go to work, clean up around the house, study, pick up the kids, attend a meeting, pick up the kids *again*—and on top of all of this right now we've got to get ready for Thanksgiving even as Christmas lurks around the corner.]

Who has the time to "pray without ceasing?"

You do.

We do.

And this might be the surprise: you *do* pray without ceasing.

To pray without ceasing is to give up our lives to God at all times. This is an inward attitude that is reflected in our actions.

We get some help here from Calvin, who, in spite of popular portrayals of him as a gloomy and dismal soul, seems to have discovered the connection between prayer and rejoicing. "When we are cast down and laid low," Calvin writes, "we are raised up again by prayer, because we lay the burden which oppressed us upon God. But since every day, and *indeed every moment*, there are many things which can disturb our peace and drive away our joy, Paul bids us to pray without ceasing."

We do not pray because we have hours to retreat to be "alone with God"—which, really, is a terrifying thought. We pray as a way of keeping a connection between ourselves and the Giver of Life. We pray that we might continue in the *joy* that is offered to us by God. And as we pray we are reminded again and again who we are and who God is.

We pray with our whole being, with our bodies, with our minds, with our spirits. We can move toward God, acknowledging that we are forgiven and accepted because of God's grace in Christ. And we can acknowledge that others are accepted as well.

Prayer moves us toward others to heal, to bring right relationships, to make peace. This type of prayer is not satisfied with how things are. It hopes and works and waits for the day when the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

When we pray, we unload the hurt and the pain that we feel, knowing that other hurt as well. When we pray, we are sent from our painful, isolated lives into the world where others are hurting, to bring the good news of God's love and reconciliation. When we pray *constantly* we open ourselves to a new reality.

Perhaps most importantly for us at the start of this Thanksgiving week—the rejoicing and praying church can be a church that in all circumstances gives thanks.

Again, this is not because everything always goes well for us. Certainly, we have lived long enough to know that. Giving thanks, however, turns our focus away from ourselves, away from our lives and back toward the living God.

It's a choice, of course. Instead of giving thanks, we *can* lapse into regret over the past or bitterness over the present. We can choose to “covet” (to use that wonderful “Old Testament” word)—to be envious of what others have and to desire what others have instead of showing gratitude for what we have received.

These choices are *always* open to us. That means, however, that we can at any time choose to be thankful as well.

The amazing thing about giving thanks in all circumstances is that the more we give thanks, the more we give the rest of what is ours as well: our treasures, our talents, our time—our very selves. Perhaps you have noticed this. Those people who are the most giving generally tend to be the most thankful, not necessarily the ones with the most “stuff” to give. And those people who are the most thankful, gratefully aware of the loving, forgiving presence of God in their lives and in this glorious world, also tend to be the most giving.

Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving involve us with God, with one another and with the whole world as we look forward to the new age that God is bringing.

So let me suggest three ways that we might move forward, not only toward Thanksgiving Day, but through the months ahead.

First, look for the joy within you. In spite of all that might weigh you down and cast a shadow over your life and spirit, there are reasons to rejoice. Look for them. Be open to them. Let them embrace you.

Notice when you are praying. You might be speaking. Or you might be singing or walking or dancing or reading or crying or crying out in exasperation or despair. As I said, you pray without ceasing already. Watch for those occasions when you are giving your life up to God.

And, as we were told as children, as we tell our children, say thank-you. To God, to your neighbor, to family members, to one another here in this congregation. Seek out occasions of gratitude.

Look for joy.

Notice yourself praying.

Seek occasions of gratitude.

Three ways forward as we move toward Thanksgiving.

Three ways forward as we live our lives each day.