

sermon-12/14/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“The Surprising Will of God”  
I Thess. 5:16-24  
By Jim Patten

Desmond Tutu has lived through some very tough times in South Africa. Yet, in spite of all he has gone through he has had the ability to laugh. He is known for his mirth and the joy his humor creates. To be in his presence is to be joyful. It is contagious. Any who saw him on television, or in person, when he was in Seattle recently know what I am talking about.

One of the natural outcomes of entering into the Christian faith in a deep way is that kind of joy. That does not mean we are never sad, but joy always seems to surface eventually. Joyful Christians are like lights in the deepest darkness.

Peter Storey, another pastor who helped lead the church’s struggle against apartheid, in speaking of light, said in a sermon, “A candle light is a protest at midnight. It is a non-conformist. It says to the darkness, ‘I beg to differ!’” When Christians are not intimidated by tough times, but can still express joy, they are saying, “I beg to differ.” The darkness will not have the final word. No darkness can extinguish the light of Christ. In Advent we wait to celebrate the coming of that light once again at Christmas.

This is the third Sunday of Advent. We are over half way to Christmas. Historically this third Sunday has been called Joy Sunday. It is the Sunday we focus on the joy of the incarnation we long to experience ever more fully.

The lectionary gives us another Advent text about waiting for the second coming of Christ. This one is in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians. It is a perfect text for Joy Sunday. It is an appropriate text for all of us who live in the meantime between God’s coming to us in Christ on that first Christmas and our waiting for God’s kingdom to be fully realized.

When we discussed this passage in the lectionary class one person said this was his favorite Bible passage in the New Testament. He said he loved Paul’s definition of what it means to do the will of God. Listen again to what Paul writes. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

What a surprising description of the will of God for us. Rejoice, pray and give thanks. That’s pretty clear. It is certainly positive. There is nothing here about sacrifice or denying oneself. Those, too, are part of being a faithful Christian. But, here Paul just mentions these three: Rejoice, pray and give thanks.

If every Christian lived out the will of God in that way, this world would be a far better place, a far happier place than it is. Rejoice always. Let joy be the defining characteristic

of your lives. No more sour puss Christians making Christianity look like a trip to the dentist.

Pray without ceasing. Of course, this does not mean to spend the entire day with our eyes closed and our hands folded. It doesn't even mean to be walking through our day muttering a silent prayer while we do other things.

Some have said Paul is urging us to make our life a prayer. We are to see our lives as a conversation with God as we relate to others and as we give ourselves in work and play. We listen to our lives eager to hear that Word that sets our hearts on fire. We listen to our lives straining to hear that still small voice that is often drowned out in the noise of our busyness.

One commentator put it this way. We are to listen attentively and generously. What does it mean to be a generous listener? Certainly it has something to do with being present to others and ourselves in the midst of all that grabs our attention. Some of us can be generous with others, setting aside time to be with them. But, some of us have a very difficult time being generous with ourselves. We don't take the time to listen to our lives and the voice of God that speaks to us through people and events. To make of our life a prayer, to pray without ceasing, is to be generous and attentive listeners, not only to others, but also to ourselves.

Give thanks in all circumstances. This, on the surface, is a tough one. It is not saying give thanks **for** all circumstances. That is not possible or even healthy. God is not expecting us to give thanks when tragedy strikes. God is not expecting us to see all that happens to us as God's doing, either punishing or rewarding us.

Giving thanks in all circumstances is having the ability to sense God in the midst of all that happens to us in life, even when we are hurting and sad. It is knowing that God does not abandon us to our pain.

Will Willimon, in commenting on this passage, wrote, "If we Christians are joyful, ours is not the simple-minded, bubble-brained cheerfulness of those who deny the world's hunger and pain or who think that somehow, it is all for the best. Joy is to us a gift, a Christmas gift of God who is never content to leave us be, who intrudes, offers, creates."

Rejoice, pray, give thanks. Paul is calling us to a life that is positive, but not simplistic or happy in a shallow way. It is a life that comes from giving our whole selves to God. Commentators point out that Paul is not talking about a careful life of moderation where we cautiously give only part of ourselves to God. Paul is talking about a full blown devotion, spirit, soul, and body, swept up in God's Spirit.

Notice Paul says don't quench the Spirit. The verb here translated "quench" has to do with putting out a fire. God's Spirit is like a fire. Fire is a great metaphor for the Spirit because fire can be so unpredictable and out of our control. One scholar says the Spirit's

activity in the world is ambiguous and mysterious. Not everything or everyone who claims to be of the Spirit is right in that claim. So, Paul says, test everything.

Don't quench the Spirit, but don't be gullible either. Give the Spirit free reign in your hearts, but don't give your heart to everyone who claims they are touched by God's Spirit. There is a balance here. Presbyterians often err to the side of caution, afraid of the exuberance the Spirit can create in lives and in churches.

Believe me, I understand that caution. We have seen far too many examples of exuberant Christians whose lives and worship practices feel overly emotional and intellectually shallow. But worship that only touches the head is unlikely to lead to joy or lives that express the freedom of the Spirit.

Rejoice, pray and give thanks. When we live into those things we are living into the will of God. Such living is probably the best witness we can give to the light of Christ in our lives. St. Francis words on witnessing come to mind. He said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

When we are able to give our lives to joy, prayer, and thanksgiving, it will be contagious. We will be candles bringing light into the world's darkness. We will say to all those cynical ones who think to hope is naïve, who think change will never come, and the world will always be indifferent or cruel; we will say, "I beg to differ." Amen