



Advent 3 2017: December 17

Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 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.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...hold fast to what is good.”

At my parish visitation last Sunday during a children’s talk, I asked a small group of children this question: “How many of you like to wait?” Silence.

“How many of you like to wait?” I asked again. More silence.

So I tried a different approach: “What’s hard about waiting?” I asked. And they all began to talk.

It’s just hard” one little boy said, followed by a toddler repeating the word “hard” with an adorable frown on her face.

“I just don’t like to wait.” Another boy said.

“I like to have my snack now!” A third child said, finally giving a concrete example which helped others chime in too about the various things it was hard to wait for.

And so it was perfect---the children said what all of us adults sometimes feel about waiting: waiting can be hard when we yearn for something good to arrive.

But, of course, what the children in the parish I was visiting had not experienced and, therefore, could not express is how hard it is to wait for something that is more than simply pleasurable. They could not express how hard it is to wait for something crucial to your life.

And some here today may know something about this—how hard it is to wait for things that are crucial to our lives—waiting, for instance, for news about a diagnosis or waiting for the news about the health of a person important to you, waiting to get some sort of word from an estranged family member, waiting for a sign that a time of great darkness is lifting, waiting for the easing up of the news of political and economic unrest, waiting for clarity about the direction of a massive property redevelopment.

And in all these different situations, it’s important to note that the waiting can stretch out from weeks, to months, to years. Oh, the waiting for years—how difficult it can be, how confusing it can be, how deflating it can be.

This was part of the very predicament that the church at Thessalonica was facing, the community that Paul is addressing in the letter we heard today. They had fully expected that Jesus would return right away, bringing with him the fullness of life with God and life with one another. They believed that they would see the reign of God was fully realized—that they would live to see a world with no more injustice, no more war, no more disease and no more death. To put it another way, they believed that they would live in a world where God’s own massive property and community development would fully appear.

But this is not what happened. Time passed and the fully fleshed reign of God did not appear and so they got worried, they got anxious and some even lost their ability to keep on doing the things that sustained their lives and their life as a Church—things like working, things like prayer, taking care of those most vulnerable in their own community, spreading the good news and growing the church. In other words, in their focus on the future, they lost touch with the present.

And this is what Paul speaks to. He praises them for their faithfulness. He praises them for the work they have done and how it has been and will be an inspiration for others. And then he tells those who have pinned everything on their future:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 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.”

He tells them—find joy in your current circumstances—attend to a prayer life that helps you stay in touch with what you’re grateful for. When you get lost, remember the words of the prophets that remind us all about doing justice. Hold on to gratitude and justice making every day of your life.

Pay attention to these things in the present moment because when you do these things in the present, the longed-for future will be a place to grow. When you do these things in the present, you will taste the reign of God, the longed-for future now.

And so I wonder today—where in your life as an individual are you focused on a longed-for future as an individual that is somehow robbing you of the joy you can have in the present moment? Where is your preoccupation with something that may happen someday supplanting the gift of your life that is right in front of you? What might it look like for you to hold fast to what is good in the here and now, for you to turn your attention both to the blessing of what is right in front of you and to the power you have to enact the prophet's call to justice now?

And I also wonder—where in the life of this parish is the delay of a longed-for future creating a kind of confusion or even deflation? What do Paul's words to the Thessalonians about rejoicing, about prayer, about remembering the words of the prophets and about holding fast to what is good, what do Paul's words have to say to this parish right now? How might this parish in its waiting and working for something that is in the future, dwell even more fully in the present moment, a present moment full of blessings and challenges.

There are philosophers and personal coaches and religious figures who advise their followers and students and practitioners to abandon any notion of waiting and watching for something to occur in the future. Some say that the very idea of focusing on the future disables our capacity for happiness in the present moment.

One such person said: "... give up waiting as a state of mind. When you catch yourself slipping into waiting . . . snap out of it. Come into the present moment. Just be, and enjoy being. If you are present, there is never any need for you to wait for anything. So next time someone says, "Sorry to have kept you waiting," you can reply, "That's all right, I wasn't waiting. I was just standing here enjoying myself." (Eckhart Tolle: *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*)

While this is an interesting idea and while, Lord knows, we need help in living in the present versus being impatient or constantly looking to the future to satisfy and delight us, while this is an interesting idea and is the emphasis for today, know that we as Christians, especially in Advent, hold a more nuanced and complex view of the present and the future and the relationship between the two.

We believe that Christ, the bearer of all joy, of all justice, and of all peace has come, and therefore, the present is full of potential for joy and justice and peace. And we believe that this same Christ will come again, and so at the same time, it is right to wait, to watch, and to long for an even more complete joy and justice and peace in the future.

And so today, people of Holy Trinity Cathedral, we live in the tension between the present and the future. But when the future is delayed, when confusion and deflation come to us on account of that delay, a focus on the present can be like a tonic to us, energizing us for the ministry that is already ours and preparing a way for God's future to come to us in God's own time.