

# "Always"

## Philippians 4:4-7

October 9, 2011

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

“Always” is a word we don’t use very well. A wife may say to her husband, “You always leave your dirty laundry on the floor.” A child may say to his parents, “You always yell at me.” A boss may say to an employee, “You are always late.” But are these assertions true or are they exaggerations? Is there anything which any of us does “always”? We may do something quite often, but I doubt that we “always” do anything.

Yet, in our epistle reading for today, St. Paul commands us to do something “always”. He says, “Rejoice in the Lord always – again I will say, Rejoice.” Talk about redundancy. He not only uses the word “always”, but he repeats himself. In addition to that, the imperative form of the word in the Greek indicates a command to do something continually. Is this a realistic command or a hopeless pipedream?

Often Christians are accused of being unrealistic and naïve. Unbelievers think we subscribe to little ditties like, “Don’t worry! Be happy”, and “Smile. God loves you.” They want to say, “Rejoice always? Has St. Paul looked out of the window lately and seen what’s going on out there?”

There is a sense of hopelessness about the future. Terrorism, a lousy economy, shrinking natural resources, rebellions across the world and within our own country and other factors do not lead people to rejoice about the future. It seems that there are so many natural disasters which we hear more about on a daily basis than we ever had before: fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, and so on. Not only can people not rejoice always, but they can’t seem to rejoice at all.

There is the human suffering going on. Children are dying at the hands of live in lovers. Friends murder friends. Someone gets drunk and crashes into a crowded bar, injuring many and killing a few. People are diagnosed with cancer and day way too soon. A beloved member of the congregation dies, leaving a wife of nearly 52 years. Not many feel like rejoicing.

As Christians, we feel little reason to rejoice. Our faith is ridiculed and rejected. We are personally persecuted and put to shame. We struggle in the ministry which God has given us and get frustrated over the lack of doers and dollars. We spend more time complaining than rejoicing.

If we are honest, deep down, each of us struggles with sin. We may not rejoice over our sanctified living because it doesn't seem to be there. We struggle with our sinfulness and become crushed by our sins. Maybe it's a struggle with alcohol or drugs. Maybe it's the pornography, so well hidden yet so often used. Maybe it's a failure to control our anger with our children or our spouse. The list could go on and on. We are weighed down with guilt. Rejoice? Always? Really?

The problem here is not the set of circumstances in our world, in our community, or even in ourselves. It goes much deeper than this. There is a root cause for all of these reasons not to rejoice and that is sin.

God created all things good. In completing His creation, he labeled everything as being "very good." Yet everything changed when sin entered the world. We often think of sin as some sort of naughty action. It is so much more than that. Sin is corrosive and destructive force. It ruins everything it touches. Sin has ruined God's good world. Sin has ruined us. Sin condemns the world to destruction. Sin condemns us to destruction. There is no clear and apparent reason for any of us to rejoice at any time, much less "always".

But Christian rejoicing is not the same as the rejoicing which this world advocates. This world rejoices when circumstances dictate it. When the economy is good, when your family is strong, when your body is healthy – THEN the world tells you to rejoice. Otherwise, don't rejoice, the world tells you. The world cannot fathom rejoicing always because circumstances do not always call for it.

Christian rejoicing is different. St. Paul does not say, "Rejoice in your circumstances!" He says, "Rejoice in the Lord!" The reason for us to rejoice is NOT in what the circumstances in our world or our own personal lives have done for us. The reason for us to rejoice in the Lord and what He has done for us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ descended into our decidedly un-joyful world to redeem it – to buy it back. This includes not only us and all humanity, but the physical universe as well. Jesus came to liberate us from sin and all of its consequences. He came to liberate the universe, as well. St. Paul says in Romans that “the creation was subjected to futility” with the “hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption.”

Jesus took all sins and, indeed, sinfulness itself to the cross. Jesus’ death releases us from sin and our bondage to physical and spiritual death. Jesus’ blood shed forgives our sin and reconciles us to God again. Jesus’ resurrection from corruption and death releases all of creation from the same. The resurrection of Jesus points to the day when all of creation will be freed from corruption of all kinds. Thus, because of what Jesus has done in the past and what He has guaranteed for the future, there is reason to rejoice, no matter what, always.

When we look at our sin and guilt, there is reason to rejoice. King David said, “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them.” (Ps. 32:1-2) The forgiveness of sins brings about blessedness. Our sins are forgiven. God has promised and we confess every Sunday, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) That means any sin, no matter how bad it is by human standard. That means every sin, no matter how often committed. Instead of being guilty over our sin, we rejoice because our sin is forgiven. Because we are always forgiven, we always rejoice.

When we look at suffering, there is reason to rejoice. We are often prisoners of the moment. We can only see the immediate effects of suffering. The Word of God calls us to see the big picture of suffering. St. Paul writes, “We rejoice in our suffering, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Rom. 5:3-5). Like the pain of exercise leads to future physical fitness and the hunger of

dieting leads to future weight loss, the suffering in our lives leads to hope which is the sure confidence in the future possession of all which God has promised. We rejoice, not in the immediate effects of suffering, but the future hope which suffering produces. Because we always have that hope which can never be taken away, we always rejoice – no matter what.

In our persecution as Christians, there is reason to rejoice. When we endure persecution for the sake of Christ, we tend to get discouraged, even depressed. We feel that we are doing something wrong or God has abandoned us. Why do we feel that way? I think it's because we measure our faith, according to the world's standard of success, rather than God's standard of faithfulness. Jesus promises that we will experience suffering when we are faithful to His Word. Only Jesus sees it as a good thing for which we rejoice and not a bad thing for which we are depressed. He said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matthew 5:11-12) Persecution blesses us and is a reason for rejoicing because it means we are on the right road – the road that leads to heaven. Because we always have heaven waiting for us, even when it seems like we have hell on earth now, we always rejoice – no matter how bad the persecution gets.

Even when it looks like the world is coming down all around us, we can still rejoice. Why? We don't see these things as evidence of the world's destruction but as signs of the world's coming redemption. Once, when Jesus was talking about world events and so-called "natural disasters", He said, "'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.'" (Luke 21:10-11) Rather than trying to frighten His followers with these words, He uses them as a reason to rejoice. He goes on to say, "When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28) Rather than look down in depression, look up in hope. This is all a fulfillment of what Isaiah urged in our Old Testament lesson for today, "It will

be said on that day, 'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'" (Is. 25:9) Because we always have that salvation – won by Christ, delivered through Holy Baptism, proclaimed in His Word, and strengthened in Holy Communion – we will rejoice always.

As a result of rejoicing, other things change as well. Paul says, "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone." This is a humble, patient steadfastness, which is able to submit to injustices, disgrace, and maltreatment without hatred and malice, trusting in God in spite of all of it." (Rienecker and Rogers, p.560) When you are always rejoicing over the big picture, you can be reasonable about the little picture.

Also, as a result of rejoicing, we have no need to be anxious about anything. But, Paul says, "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." When you are always rejoicing over the big picture, you don't need to worry about the little picture. Tell God what you need and trust Him to do it. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:31-32)

Finally, as a result of rejoicing, we have "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." This is not a fleeting peace or a mere peaceful feeling. This is not a peace based on good circumstances. It is a peace that cannot be explained because it exists in all circumstances. It is a peace which will guard your hearts and minds from despair like soldiers guarding a city from attack. This peace is not tied to changing conditions. It is a peace which ties you to the unchanging Christ.

"Never say never" is a phrase you often hear. A similar phrase would be equally true: "Never say always." To say it is to exaggerate and often be untrue.....except in this one case. Because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ – adopting you into his family and forgiving your sins; because of what God is doing for you in providing for you and protecting you; and because of what

God will do for you in leading you through the difficulties of this temporary existence to the eternal joys of heaven: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Amen