

December 17, 2017: Third Sunday of Advent (Year B)
1 Thessalonians 5:12-24: Where Joy is at Home

Some people are really hard to buy for.

I once heard a story about a young man, who was head over heels for a young woman. They had only recently started dating, but long enough to have come to the point where they were exclusive. And it was just before Christmas. So naturally the young man wanted to take the opportunity to show her how he felt about her.

He thought very carefully and deliberately about what to buy for her. He spent far more money than he should have. Love and credit cards are a dangerous combination. All told he purchased her ten presents, then waited anxiously for the day to arrive when they would exchange their gifts with each other. He loved everything she got for him, but he did not get the reaction he was hoping for. Nine of the ten presents ended up being returned to the store. The story does have a happy ending. Eventually they got married, and they found a solution. The woman buys what she wants, hands it to the man and says, "Wrap this."

It's hard to know what to buy people for Christmas. It is so much easier to sit down and make a list for ourselves, that describes what we hope to receive for Christmas, than to make a list that describes what we want to give. What about God? Does he know what you or I want for Christmas? He knows us better than we know ourselves, so I would say the answer to that question is "Yes."

Since we know it would be possible for God to make this list, the next thing we might want to know then is what kinds of things would be on it. What does God want for us? It might be helpful to ask it another way; What does God will for us? We don't have to search very hard to find the answer. The Bible has several lists that describe what God wants to give us. The passage we read from Thessalonians is an excellent example.

Reading through it though, some of these things don't seem a whole lot like gifts. He wants to give us a healthy amount of respect for those who have charge over us in the Lord. Basically he is talking about pastors here. That sounds like a gift for me, but not so much for you all. He wants to give us the ability to never argue, to tell the lazy (in a nice way) to get back to work, to be encouraging, to be patient, to be helpful, to be forgiving, to never seek revenge, to always do good for other people. These sound less like gifts and more like obligations, and difficult ones at that.

Then we stumble across these two words, in verse 16. Rejoice always. God wants to give us joy. God's will for us, is that we have joy, and always. He doesn't want joy to just visit us once in a while. He wants joy to come and stay. He wants joy to be at home in us. That really does seem like a gift, but like the others, not one that we can actually open, or experience, in this life.

I can think of two misconceptions that make it hard to imagine joy being at home in us...

The first misconception is that joy is an emotion. This comes from the idea that joy and happiness are the same thing, and they are not. Happiness is an emotion. Many things can provide happiness, for a while, but the happiness always fades. Joy is much deeper. It's more than a feeling.

The second misconception, and this is related to the first, is that, as an emotion, joy is something we have no control over, that it comes and goes as it chooses, that it is dependent on our circumstances. If

we look closely we see that this located in the context of a series of commands. This tells us that we have a role to play, that joy, like love, is a choice.

We can acknowledge that like love, sometimes being joyful is a difficult choice. It's easy when things are going well for us, but much harder when they are not. The choice gets even harder around the holidays, when we seem to notice certain things even more...a loved one who has passed away, a tense relationship with a family member, or financial struggles.

Yet, no matter what we are going through, God wants to give us the gift of joy. He wants us to be joyful, all the time. As I said earlier, He wants joy to be at home in us. As Andee reminded us during children's time this morning, the gift of joy is what Christmas is all about. As Jesus said to his disciples in the Gospel of John, while sharing with them about the possibility of living in a relationship with their heavenly Father, "I have told you these things that you may have joy, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11)

Even if we can get past the idea that joy is not an emotion, but something deeper. And we can realize that joy is not something over which we have no control, but is a choice. We are still faced with the reality that joy is not something we can possess or choose on our own. God must give it to us. God must continually breath new life into it, as life circumstances threaten to destroy it. The good news this morning, is that he does this, for each one of us.

This is what Paul was getting to with these final words,

"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" (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

Sanctify is a word we don't use as much as others when we are describing what God does for us. We use words like "forgive," and "cleanse" and "save" far more often, so we are more familiar with them. But this word "sanctify" is every bit as important in understanding this thing called salvation. The word "sanctify" literally means to set apart for a purpose. In reference to God it is to set apart for a holy purpose. If you are a follower of Jesus, if you have committed yourself to him through the waters of baptism, you have been sanctified by his Holy Spirit. Your holy purpose is to glorify Him. You glorify him by receiving and opening the gifts he wants to give you, by living the life he wills for you.

You have probably heard this before. You have heard about how God, by his Holy Spirit that is within us, enables us to to the things on this list. He can help us to be at peace with others, to encourage others, to be patient, to be helpful, to be forgiving, to do good for others, etc. But less often do we think about the Holy Spirit as that power of God, living inside us, that enables us to have joy, not only in the good times, but also in the bad times. Being joyful is something that God commands us, but like all of his commands, it is also a gift that he gives us.

A popular British newspaper recently conducted a poll in which they asked their readers to identify the top dilemmas they face at Christmas. They compiled the results and published the top 25. Number 2 was batteries, as in, forgetting to purchase batteries for Christmas gifts that need them. Number 1 was Turkey Troubles. That's not really relevant, but I figured you were curious and wanted to know.

The biggest dilemma followers of Jesus face each Christmas, and really throughout the year, is similar. Only it's not God who forgets to give us the power we need to experience the gifts that he gives us. It's

us. We neglect to put it to use. I hope each and every one of you opens the gift of joy this Christmas, so that joy can truly be at home in you.