

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7  
December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Little Billy thought he was old enough to stay home by himself while mom goes to the grocery store to run a few Christmas errands. Mom agrees and leaves her son home alone. Billy was fine the first hour. But then after that he began to get a little nervous. “I wonder if something happened to mom. Will she be coming back,” he thought. As time went on, Billy began to get more and more nervous. Then, all of a sudden, he started hearing noises. Someone was outside. Now he was very worried. He was afraid someone was outside and maybe that person would try to get inside. Oh how he wished he was not home alone. He wished that someone he knew was with him. He even called out for his mother as he was gripped with fear.

Then, after just a few moments, he heard footsteps up to the door. He tried to peek around the Christmas tree sitting in the front room window to see if he could identify the person coming to the front door. The door began to move. He called out for mom – but of course – she was not in the house. The person was now trying to get into the house. Suddenly, the lock began to move and the door opened. Little Billy ran upstairs to his bedroom and hid under his bed more afraid than he ever had been. Then a voice called, “Billy, I’m home. Please help me bring in a few of the groceries.” Needless to say, Billy was relieved to know that it was only mom.

In the epistle text from Philippians 4 we hear Paul say, “The Lord is at hand.” What this means is that, “The Lord is near.” He is close by. While little Billy was worried that mom was far away, the Lord is never far away – the Lord is near.

We can say, “The Lord is near” for our time right now. In other words, “He is with us.” But Paul was referring to the coming of our Lord on the Last Day. He is near. No man knew the hour of His coming; every Christian lived as if He might come at any time. For that reason Paul said at the beginning of the reading today, “Rejoice.” Rejoice because to live in Christ – to wait in grand expectation – brings great joy because joy will be had for those who believe on the last day. And then there is something else – and it comes in this strange word in the original language that is translated as “reasonableness” in our text for today. Allow me to read the text again: *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.* Because the Lord is coming – we rejoice. Because the Lord is at hand He is surely showing us His reasonableness. Did you catch that last one? Allow me to explain it in a way that might be more helpful.

Paul uses a Greek word – *epieikes* – considered one of the most untranslatable words in all of Greek. It’s not because we don’t know what it means. Rather, it’s because it has so many different translations. It has been translated as gentleness, softness, patients, forbearance, modesty, and in our text for today, reasonableness. To explain the word better in plain English we could say that *epieikes* means, “justice and something better than justice.” In other words, the law is just, but there are times when it becomes “unjust” and that is when *epieikes* comes in.

Let’s take a simple example. Suppose we have two students in a classroom. The teacher corrects their examination papers. We apply justice, and we find that the one has eighty percent and other fifty percent. From the point of view of justice there is nothing to be said against these marks. But we go a little further; we find that the child who got eighty percent has been able to do his work in ideal conditions; he has books, he has peace to study, he had tutors at a younger age, a room where he can have quiet and no worries and no distractions. Everything has been in that child’s favor. Now the boy who got fifty percent has a different story. He comes from a very poor home where his equipment is the bare minimum, or he has been ill and in great pain.

Perhaps he has a stress or strain that affected his ability to prepare. In justice this child deserves the fifty percent and no more. However, *epieikes* will value his paper far higher than that. You see, when we go beyond justice, equity deserves far more. This difficult word in Greek is the quality of the man who knows when not to apply the letter of the law.

In reality Christ Jesus is the only one who can exhibit what is meant by this word. God deals with us so leniently, He withholds His justice. Christ is gentle, kind, patient, and more than only fair. We use these words and grasp what they mean. But even the meanings that we attach to them do not compare to the Lord's gentleness, kindness, patience, etc...

I wonder at times if my anger and spite makes me want to enforce the letter of the law on others when it comes to what others might owe me. I would imagine that all of us have done this. We think, "They have put off paying me back long enough. I'm not showing any kind of grace or leniency." "That person has never given one inch to me, why should I show her compassion and let her get away with more than she would ever allow me." In our minds justice is the way to go – in all things. It's the only way things will be right. It's the only way things will be equal. It's the only way things will be fair. Much of the time our goal is to be fair and have fairness be upon us.

Haven't you heard the adage, "life isn't fair"? How true it is. We know life is not fair. Some get more than us. We, at times, get more than others. It's funny, though, we almost always see the, "he got more than me," rather than the, "I got the most" part of life. Life is not fair and at times justice is not served. Life is not fair and, yes, we can say this too – God is not fair.

Thank God that God is not fair. Our Lord is a just God but He does not carry forth His justice the way He could. Rather our Lord is so lenient that He gave His only begotten Son to die for you. He is "*epieikes*" gentle, patient, and kind toward you because He loves you so much – even though you don't deserve it. He takes our fifty percent – our forty percent – our zero percent and makes it into 100%.

The Lord is near. The Lord is at hand. And during this Advent – almost Christmas now – the "Lord being at hand" is enough for us to rejoice. Like little Billy who was scared being home by himself for the first time, we find ourselves alone and afraid from time to time. But we are never alone. The Lord is at hand. The Lord is near. This gives us reason to "Rejoice" with St. Paul. He says it again, "Rejoice!" Don't forget, Paul was alone. He was held up in prison for his faith. Did he feel alone? I would imagine. Was he alone? Not a chance.

And neither are you. We have a God who is just, but gives us what we don't deserve. That gift came as a baby in a manger. This means you may be lonely from time to time, but you are never alone. He put flesh around that promise of life and forgiveness on the first Christmas. Jesus is what we can know and see and even taste yet today. He is with you always to the very end of the age. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.