

“Rejoice, Pray, and Give Thanks”, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (12/13/20)

(Slide 1) Today is the third Sunday in Advent, and we lit the 3rd candle, which is the pink candle. Do you know why we light a pink candle in the advent wreath? To help you find the answer I will give you 5 choices, then you can choose one of them. First, we light pink candle on third Sunday because pink is a color of joy. Second, because pink signifies Mary. Third, because it represents the positive outlook we have in Jesus Christ. Fourth, because the rose color symbolizes Jesus’ childhood. Fifth, because the rosebud is a sign of new birth. Which one do you think is the correct answer? The correct answer is first one - Rose is a color of joy. The rose candle is a symbol of joy. Traditionally, advent is a season of penitence and a time for preparing our hearts to celebrate the gift of salvation Jesus brings. That is why Advent lessons urge us to keep alert, stay awake and wait for the coming of Jesus Christ by repenting our sins. However, the third Sunday of Advent invites us to be in a little bit different mood. It offers a break from the theme of penitence so that we focus more on the joy that we find in Christ Jesus.

For this week, my sincere hope and prayer for you is that you may find a lot of joy in your daily life so that you rejoice always as the apostle Paul firstly exhorted to us in today’s new testament lesson.

(Slide 2) Although our lectionary reading recommends, we read verses 16-24, Paul’s exhortation starts in v. 12 and it goes to v. 22. Paul’s exhortation is divided into three parts: v. 12-13 is how you treat ministers, v. 14-15 is how you treat others, and v. 15-22 is about oneself: what you need to do. If you want to know more about Paul’s exhortation to us, you may want to read from v. 12. Anyway, let me have your attention to focus on the key verses of today’s lesson, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Yes! We know that rejoice, pray, and give thanks are very important Christian virtues, but sometimes we may think this is very difficult or even impossible to follow. How can we rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances? We may want him to say that again, like “rejoice if you

find joy, pray if you are able, and give thanks if you have good fortune.” Then, we may feel it far more easy and comfy to follow them. However, those three qualifications – always, without ceasing, and in all circumstances make it feel difficult and sometimes uncomfortable to follow. As we live in a holiday mood, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day, we are very thankful, excited, and singing for joy.

However, on the other hand, there are some people who cannot fully be in this holiday mood with thankfulness, excitement, and joy, especially this year under a global pandemic. For those who lost a loved one, for those who lost a job, for those who are suffering from Covid-19, bodily sickness, mental illness, depression, and addiction issues, for those who are struggling with relationship problems, the holiday mood makes them feel more sad, lonely, hurting, frustrated, and depressed. Although so many things in our daily lives make us unable to follow Paul’s exhortation, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.” Actually, Paul was one of the people who have no reason to rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

(Slide 3) In 2 Corinthians 11:26-27, he said, “My life has been in danger in cities, in deserts, at sea, and with people who only pretended to be the Lord’s followers. I have worked and struggled and spent many sleepless nights. I have gone hungry and thirsty and often had nothing to eat. I have been cold from not having enough clothes to keep me warm.” Indeed, outwardly, he seemed to have nothing to rejoice, pray continually, and give thanks. However, nevertheless, he rejoiced. Nevertheless, he prayed. Nevertheless, he gave thanks to God. And we find his reason for that from Philippians 3: 7 and 9. He said, “Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless.” And also, he said “I know that I belong to him. I could not make myself acceptable to God by obeying the Law of Moses. God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ.” Likewise, only because of Jesus Christ, he rejoiced always, never stopped praying, and gave thanks to God in everything.

To be honest with you, sometimes, in this season of Advent, I had been struggling with something that made me feel that it was hard for me to rejoice and give thanks. If there is anyone here who is struggling with something that makes you feel sad, lonely, hurt, hopeless and helpless, don't worry, you are not alone, I was and will be with you. It is true that the more I tried to fix it and overcome it, the bigger and more complex the problems appeared to me. I was hurt, disappointed and frustrated, and I felt like there was nothing more I could do. However, while it may sound paradoxical, I found a peace and joy from my helplessness and hopelessness. While I was praying desperately for God's help, God gave me a great enlightenment.

(Slide 4) Have you ever seen a bouncing ball? I bet you have! Tell me what happens to a ball before its bouncing up. It is hitting the bottom! Right! Unless it hits the bottom, a ball cannot bounce up. And the stronger it hits, the higher it bounces. Although I thought that it is my bottom line and limit, so there's no further way to go, it was not the end. God gave me a reason to rejoice again, pray without ceasing, and give thanks. That was the moment that I realized the meaning of Isaiah 9:2 "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." Indeed, in my darkness place, I saw a great light, which God has shined upon me, so that I am ready to rebound. God sent God's only son to this world to save God's very children from the darkness. Each one of us is God's dear child.

(Slide 5) Jesus Christ, our Lord and savior, came to us to drive out the darkness in our midst and shine his light upon us. During this season of advent, the time of waiting for Jesus Christ, I really want you to find the presence of Jesus Christ in your midst. As Jesus came to me, when you are in the most desperate, excruciating and disheartening moments, he will come to you. In that moment, the thing that we should rely on is not on our changing minds or circumstances, but on the unchangingness of our Almighty God. All we need to do is "always be joyful and never stop praying. Whatever happens, keep thanking God because of Jesus

Christ.” Remember, this is what God wants us to do. Although we are imperfect and not holy in God’s sight, if we trust in God by doing what God wants us to do, in the end, the God of peace will sanctify us entirely so that our spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Slide 6) These pictures show us a good example of putting our trust in God by doing. Last week, we had a church conference which is an annual whole church meeting as part of The UMC. It was a small group and not many people were able to join the meeting. Right, we are imperfect, but we tried to do our best for the church as the body of Christ in-person and remotely. We shared lots of joyful things with having time to pray. The pandemic is going but we are continuing to thank God because of Jesus Christ. It is our confession as faithful disciples. Let us turn away our eyes from worldly things, the problem, the situation, and our hearts and minds, which are unstable, imperfect and changeable. Fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, who is our Lord and savior and the prince of peace. He will lead us to be like his perfectness. Therefore, wait for the coming of Jesus Christ in your midst of life by rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances. Do not think that it is the end but be ready to rebound up! The one who calls you is holy; he will also make you entirely holy.

Praise God! Amen.