

## HOMILY

### *The Third Sunday of Advent*

December 13, 2009

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St. Theresa, the “Little Flower,” often prayed: “From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, good Lord deliver us.” St. Paul writes to the church in Philippi: “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!*” Have you ever thought of joy as a command? Rejoice in the Lord. What a splendid attitude to bring into worship. Rejoice! We’re in God’s house. Now it’s time to lay aside our worries, lay aside our heartaches, be done with our resentments, dry our tears, forget about our hurts, focus on Christ and rejoice!

Easier said than done; but that is God’s will for us today. Rejoice!

These words were written by a man who somehow learned to put life into perspective. Paul knew better than any of us that life can be difficult. He had been beaten for his faith, shipwrecked, imprisoned. But he knew that Jesus is greater than any adversary, any painful emotion, any remembered hurt. He is not rejoicing because of a positive mental attitude. He’s not rejoicing because he’s okay and we’re okay. He’s rejoicing because he knows that God is in control. It’s not just any kind of cheerful good mood. He is rejoicing in the Lord.

Have you heard it said that it is not what happens to us that matters in life but how we *react* to what happens to us in life. For example, we say, “You make me so angry.” The truth is that you don’t have the power to make me angry. I make myself angry in response to what you have done. Paul is saying we cannot allow our external environment to determine our internal joy.

How do you maintain grace in the face of somebody pushing your buttons? In the same way you maintain joy in the midst of grief. You keep your eye fixed on the big picture. God is in control. Nothing can defeat Christ. He is the reason we rejoice. In a hospital bed we can rejoice. By a graveside we can rejoice. During tough times, we can rejoice. We are in God’s hands. Paul writes, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all.*”

Now notice what Paul says next: *“The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.”* Notice that the message was written to a Church. It could have been written to an individual, but it was written to a community of faith. This is so important.

Christians rejoice because not only is God in control, but we rejoice because we are part of Christ’s body. You remember the story of the man who had been out of the Church for some time. While his pastor talked to him about this, he walked over to the fireplace and pulled a log from the fire. Together they watched as the log gradually cooled until it no longer glowed at all. “This is what happens to us,” said the pastor, “when we are away from the community of faith.”

Someone has said that misery loves company but joy requires it. What a beautiful insight! Joy requires company, community and connectedness.

Think about those really happy moments in your life. Those moments that delight you just thinking about them. Were you alone or did you share that event with someone else? We can have many satisfying experiences by ourselves; but to experience joy, we almost always have to be in the company of at least one other person. That’s why worship is so satisfying to our soul. That is why serving others can be a joyous experience. Anytime we move out of ourselves and connect with another human being in the name of Christ, joy is possible. For joy to be real, we need to share it with someone else.

When St. Paul says to us *“Rejoice!”* he is not talking about a temporary happy fix that is passing. He is talking about joy that is lasting and deep within. It comes from our belief that our loving God is in control of the world and that God has called us to bond together in the family of Christ. So no silly devotions or sour faces, as St. Theresa would say. We are called to rejoice in the Lord.

