

Rejoice in the Lord Always

During these pandemic times one of the most difficult things to find is a sense of joy. There is plenty to be anxious about: staying safe and healthy, the upcoming election, severe weather, you name it. Within the last month at home we have had our roof and siding replaced after April's hailstorm, and now we're awaiting removal of a large ash tree damaged by the derecho. We've had a new furnace and air conditioner installed. Our dryer died and its replacement is scheduled to arrive Monday. I'm sure you have your own list of things that have disrupted your life. It's no wonder that I have trouble finding joy.

That's why it is so startling to hear Paul's command in his letter to the Philippians today: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." His statement is even more remarkable when you consider the context in which he's writing. He's in prison. Without personal freedom, unsure of whether he faces life or death, Paul can write "Rejoice in the Lord *always*." Surely that's a lesson for us, who are in a much better situation than Paul was.

The story of the golden calf is also a lesson for us right now. God had a lot to say to Moses, and from what we know of their relationship, Moses spent a lot of time arguing with God. So he was absent from the people for a long time. Without Moses the people became restive and decided they wanted a god who was more visible than the One who led them out of Egypt. Aaron caved to their request and created the golden calf. God was not amused. Did you notice how the Lord complained to Moses about "your people"? He was ready to disown them. Once again Moses had to remind the Lord that no, they are *your* people, not mine. So the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned for them.

I don't believe that the coronavirus or the derecho were disasters sent to us by God. I want to be really clear about that. Yet in reacting to these disasters we can easily turn away from God and toward something else. That's especially true when our encounter with God through church is so different from week to week based on test positivity rates. All of the old routines are gone. Even the new routines get disrupted. Amidst all of the anxiety, it's easy to think that God is absent. But God isn't, of course; God is right here with us, wherever we are and whatever we do. What differs is our response to God's presence. That's the message of the parable we heard from Jesus this morning.

The parable is about a wedding banquet. For his son's wedding a king has made a huge feast. The invitations have gone out but when the day arrives the invited guests blow it off. They don't seem to care that the king has gone to so much trouble and expense. They had other things to do. At best they ignored the king's messengers; at worst they beat and killed them and suffered the consequences. Nevertheless, the food was still prepared and needed to be eaten. So the king sent his servants out into the streets to find guests. He told them to invite *everyone* they found and they did just that. As a result, both good and bad showed up at the feast.

Walking among his guests, the king found someone without a wedding garment. Was he one of the bad ones? Or did he just wander in uninvited because the food smelled so good? We don't know, but it's clear that he wasn't dressed for the occasion. Perhaps there was a good reason for that, so the king initially called him friend and asked him about it. But the man was speechless.

His silence condemned him. The king became angry and he ordered the man to be thrown out. Jesus summed it all up with unsettling words: “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

This parable isn't quite as threatening as last week's, in which wicked tenants were thrown out of a vineyard, but it's close. With that last remark by Jesus, we might start worrying about whether we are among the few who are chosen. Again, I think that's the wrong direction to go. The warning is there, yet there's also a remarkable promise.

Consider the extravagance of the king's open invitation. Once those originally invited disqualify themselves by making light of the summons, the king extends his invitation to *everyone*, good and bad. All are invited to the banquet. What differs is the people's reaction to the invitation, not the host's willingness to give it. I'm reminded of the parable of the sower, who scattered seed everywhere with abandon. It's where the seed landed that made a difference. Those who refused today's invitation to the banquet are like those for whom “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word,” so that the seed yielded nothing (Mt 13:22).

The man without the wedding garment is in a different category. Even though we don't know why he isn't dressed for the occasion, there's an implication that he wants to be there on his own terms. He's unprepared and unable to defend his lack of preparation. So he, too, misses the banquet.

This morning's readings give us a number of warnings. Don't put something else in place of God if in your anxiety you think God is absent. When God calls, don't blow it off. And don't try to follow God or Jesus on your own terms.

The warnings are balanced by equally clear promises. God is always present with his people. God's invitation goes out to *everyone*. God is with us and will be with us. The invitation is always there. The difference lies in how we respond to it.

Paul can say rejoice in the Lord always because he knew those promises. In the midst of great hardship, he was able to find joy. Perhaps that's the biggest lesson for us right now. May *you* find some joy in your life this week. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.