

## I Thessalonians 5:15-18

September 20, 2015

*the way of joy*

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Over the past several weeks we have been working with this short passage as a succinct description of basic Christian practice. There is the way of gratitude (giving thanks in all circumstances), the way of goodness (not repaying evil for evil, but seeking the good of all) and the way of prayer (pray without ceasing). The emphasis here is on the word way, because this is we are talking about a life long process of learning to live rooted in Christ and bearing the marks of his Spirit in our daily practice. This *way* is not complete until our baptism is complete we pass from this life into eternal life. Its one reason I love the Latin word *Ultreïa* so much. Pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago traditionally greet one another with the phrase *Buen Camino* which means “good journey to you.” The traditional response is *Ultreïa*, which is a word of encouragement meaning, “go forth, onward, and keep going beyond.” As we live in Christ and by his Spirit develop the habits of prayer, gratitude and goodness, we need to encourage one another in our journey together. So If say *Ultreïa!* to you, don’t be startled; and by all means please say it to me.

Today we come to fourth practice recommended in our text and it may be the most challenging of all.

*Rejoice always?* At first glance that seems ridiculous, possibly even dangerous, if not self-indulgent. With images of Syrian families fleeing their war ravaged country only to be beaten by Hungarian border guards, or people being swept away by floods in Utah, let alone the current state of political discourse in this country, it hardly seems wise, or even possible to follow the apostle’s advice to rejoice *always*. Yet that is only one way to read the text. There is another way that is much more edifying.

First of all we have to remember that this letter to the Thessalonians was written in 50 AD, that’s less than 30 years from the death and resurrection of Jesus. The letter pre-dates all the gospels, the books of Acts and several other letters. This is one of the earliest descriptions of basic Christian practice. In other words if you want to know what the most essential practices go with being a follower of Jesus, here it is: non-retaliation, goodness, prayer, gratitude and joy. We often make it much more complicated; it’s not. The second thing to remember is that Christians at that time were not living a safe or fancy life. One scholar said, “Thessalonica in the time of Paul was hardly a paradise. Under the heel of imperial Rome, many in the town were living as slaves. Those who were free were likely poor, illiterate and unable to obtain what we would consider basic medical care. They knew the meaning of suffering, and the Christians among them would have faced daily persecution for their faith and practice.” Paul was well aware that his encouragement to rejoice always was asking them to practice a way of resistance to the normal cultural codes. Under these circumstances, one could understand if they gave into despair or hopelessness, perhaps anger or rage. The same is true of those facing the perils of this fractured world just now. And, of course, the same could be said of us when we must undergo suffering of one kind or another. Rejoicing is an act of defiance. It is an act of hope. It is to say, my circumstances will not determine the state of my being. The great

gospel and spiritual songs of the African American tradition display this joyful defiance. They were composed and sung by slaves who refused to be defined by the reality of their slave masters. *Rejoicing in the Lord* became for them a way of sustaining their identity by remembering they belonged to God and not to any other. Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized this when he left the comfortable confines of Union Seminary in New York and began worshipping at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and teaching Sunday school. It was there he described his deep response to the preaching of Jesus Christ with vigor and especially the “negro spirituals” which moved him so much that he brought back recordings of the spirituals that he used in his underground seminary for pastors resisting the Nazi takeover of Germany. Rejoicing always is not an invitation to escape into lala-land. It’s a summons to claim ones identity in Christ and resist the urge to be defined by someone else or your circumstances.

The other night one of our deacons, Guy Roberts, made a careful distinction. “You are not called to rejoice that you are in pain, going through a divorce, losing a child, or suffering illness. You are called to rejoice that in all these circumstances, you belong to the Lord.” Belonging to Christ is what makes rejoicing possible. It is the deep source of joy. This joy is not to be confused with happiness either. One can be unhappy with the current state of the world, I certainly am, and still have a sense of joy that comes from belonging to God. One does not have to be happy to rejoice. That was the secret of the African American church experience and it remains so today. When Saint Paul said in another letter to the Philippians, *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice*, he was sitting in a prison cell where he was banished because of his preaching the gospel. Prison is no place of happiness, but it is often a place where defiant and joyful hope arises.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century plagues had taken thousands of lives across Europe. One woman in Norwich England survived the plagues but her family did not. In 1373 when she was 30 years old and living alone she became deathly sick. During this sickness, which she eventually survived, she received a series of visions that she later wrote as the Divine Revelations of Love. Now we know her as the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich whose writing has influenced millions of people precisely because of her experience of God’s love in the midst of serious suffering. Famously she wrote, “*all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.*” But she also wrote “If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, *I know nothing of it*, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love [of God].”

The way of joy is joined with the way of gratitude, the way of goodness and the way of prayer. This is the Christian life. It is a way of living so deeply rooted in God’s love for us that we can rejoice always. *Always*. Because we know we belong to God whose love is everlasting.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Great Trinity of Love. Amen.