

Scriptures I Thessalonians 5:16-19 ... John 1:6-8

“In All Circumstances?”

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

In *all* ... circumstances.

Let me invite each of us, and all of us, to suspend for a moment some obvious rejoinders here. The scoffing. The skepticism. Qualifications, even.

Let me invite each of us, and all of us, to instead draw a deep, hopeful, Advent breath ... and listen carefully to the Apostle Paul’s words that follow:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

“For this is the will of God.” To many, this is not an especially inviting phrase.

“The will of God.” A closer inspection of the Greek original may come to our aid, here. The word commonly translated as will is, in Greek, *thelema*. Its more comprehensive meaning: A deep inclination. A nurturing. A desire. In fact, every time I hear the phrase “God’s will”, I follow the lead of a trusted colleague and substitute in my mind the phrase “God’s desire”.

“Rejoice always,” Paul encourages us. “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. For this is the will” – the intent – the desire – “of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I would venture here that God’s desire for us to be saturated by the exercises of rejoicing and praying and giving thanks this Advent is not about compulsive Christmas activity ... but about a fully receptive response to the Spirit.

God's desire for us in these spiritual exercises, I gather, is not about Presbyterian duty ... but about a thoroughgoing devotion.

God's desire for us in these spiritual exercises, I imagine, is not about an exercise of our will in accepting God's will – but about our willingness to follow God's loving intent.

So perhaps – just perhaps – Paul's invitation to the fullness of rejoicing, praying, and thanksgiving is not about how we offer *our* Christmas good will to the world. Perhaps it's all about our Advent openness to *God's* good will.

Our Advent openness to embrace Paul's trifecta today:

Thanksgiving : We celebrated this two weeks ago.

Rejoicing: The glimpse we get of Christmas this third Sunday of Advent.

Praying: Two weeks hence, for new life to come.

Always.

Per the words of John the baptizer in the gospel today: At this time of the church year – this season that shapes us our pre-Christmas experience – we testify to the light that desires what is best for us. As opposed to our self-imposed, duty-filled burdens we bear, in our frenetic attempts to be the light for others.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will – the desire – of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Still, our doubts linger – and the questions remain: Rejoice *always*? Pray *without ceasing*? Give thanks in *all* circumstances?

Should we be, as some of our more emotive Christian sisters and brothers might put it, “Too blessed to be distressed? Too anointed to be disappointed?”

Should we shout, as a Pentecostal woman once did when I, her waitstaff, spilled half a pot of coffee in her lap, “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”?

Should we applaud the legions of the well-meaning pious who say to the grieving family member, “Rest assured, this is all part of God’s will”?

As the Apostle Paul would say in other places: By no means!

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will – the desire – of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Our willful Protestant culture often frames these words of total commitment as a personal, how-to guide for self-improvement – vainglorious attempts to achieve spiritual perfection. Paul’s earliest Christian audience would beg to differ. “Always”, “without unceasing”, and “in all circumstances” emphasized for them not human perfection, but God’s possibilities . . . not personal compulsion, but social completion. A whole, complete, devoted attitude of Christian community and possibilities.

As we move from our sense of Presbyterian moderation to these Communion symbols of thoroughgoing devotion (Brosend, 64), let us consider how we might practically apply our rejoicing, our praying, and our thanksgiving to our spirit of Christmas gift-giving to come.

While this may be too late for the more efficient ones of us to consider, I would invite each of us to a spirit of gift-giving this Christmas focused not on gifts given to someone for their personal pleasure, but gifts on behalf of someone for their common good.

What about a gift to Bethesda Cares, say, on behalf of a family member who has a passion for the well-being of the homeless? To Walter Reed Hospital, on behalf of a friend who cares deeply about wounded veterans? To an organization aiding the longsuffering in a land meaningful to your loved? Fill in your own blanks!

This Christmas: What greater, more all-encompassing rejoicing and gratitude can there be than from the one who knows you are hearing the song of their outstretched heart, and singing it for them through your gift on their behalf?

It's an authentic gratitude of a compassionate action, reflected by the Greek word *eucharistia* – thanksgiving – whence we get the word Eucharist ... what we who are Protestant call Holy Communion.

Eucharistia – Thanksgiving – and Communion: Two symbolic realities, joined at the social hip. Giving thanks in all circumstances, because we care more about the common good this Christmas than about our personal pleasure.

Expressions of our whole devotion to God's will – God's desire – for us, shared today around this common table ...

All of our sufferings – that can even be transformed into joys –
All our concerns – that can even be transformed into comfort –
All our worries – that can even be transformed into thanksgiving ...

All of our passions and Christ's Passion – transformed into our compassion for God's entire world ...

Communion begins ...

A BETTER RESURRECTION

by: Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

I HAVE no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk:
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall--the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.