

Sermon: Rejoice Always!

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 17, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There is this classic and timeless sketch on Saturday Night Live, called “Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley”, performed by comedian Al Franken, depicting a fictional character ‘Stuart’ with a perfectly coiffed bleached-blond hairdo, and a seemingly endless array of smile with irrepressible optimism. The tagline of the sketch, comes often in the beginning and at the end, with Stuart looking at himself in a mirror, declaring “I am good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” In between the tagline, Stuart would often talk about himself, comment on current events, or interview celebrities while seemingly oblivious to their celebrity status.

The whole show is of course satirical, incredibly irreverent and incredibly funny, poking fun at the whole positive thinking, self-help enterprise that our society seems to be enamoured with—that is as long as I think I am good enough, as long as I think I am smart enough, then of course people will like me. It is not a self-fulfilling prophecy, but a self-fulfilling fallacy borderline lunacy.

While positive thinking may have some positive effects on a personal and psychological level, but on a greater scheme of things, it hardly moves the needle—as thinking happy thoughts, as much as one may wish so, does not bring joy or even happiness to one’s life. What then does?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this third Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Joy, as we celebrate and await the coming of the Christ Child, we come to this imperative, a command really, issued by the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, to ‘rejoice always’. In case one might miss this command or dismiss it somehow, Paul repeats it again elsewhere, in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

What gave Paul such assurance, such confidence, such optimums to ‘rejoice’ that he would issue such a general call for the rest of us to do so likewise? Was his life filled with riches, all his goals achieved, all his dreams fulfilled? Or borrowing the parlance from Maslow’s theory of motivational hierarchy, that had he self-actualized? Not really! Was he

esteemed to be prestigious, well-liked by all, warmly embraced everywhere he went, by friends and foes? Not quite! Did he enjoy overall security, personal safety? Was his physiological needs met, with food, water, shelter and rest? No, no, no and no!

In fact, this is how Paul described his own life, in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28, *“Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.”*

The truth is: Paul lived such a harsh life that it would make the strongest of us shudder, and would certainly cause Stuart Smalley to break out into an incoherent diatribe against himself, should he experience even a fraction of Paul’s life challenges. What then gives Paul the assurance to rejoice, and the confidence to command other to do the same? The answer is Jesus Christ!

The Christ Child who was born to Virgin Mary, in a humble manger, some two thousands years ago, is the same Christ King who is to come, to be worshiped by all peoples and nations, as he gather all the scattered, and put heavens and earth under his footstool. Christ is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies, to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive, and release to the prisoners, so that the year of the Lord’s favour, the great Jubilee be proclaimed. Christ is the reason that we the faithful will be given garland instead of ashes, be anointed with oil of gladness instead of morning, and be adorned with a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Our confidence in Christ is not a self-fulfilling prophecy, fallacy or lunacy, our confidence in Christ is entirely based on what God had done for the covenantal people in the past, and on what God is doing now, and has promised to do in the future. In Christ, those who sow in tears will reap with joy. Through Christ, our mouth will be filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. With Christ, we could boldly proclaim among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for us.” In response, the nations shall say, “The Lord has done great things for them.”

But of course, this imperative to rejoice from the Apostle Paul, is not an licence to sit back and not bothering to sow. Paul's command comes with additional clauses, that is pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Praying sets our relationship with our Creator, our Father, it reorient us towards the divine, and sometimes, it even moves the hand of God. Giving thanks, is both an act and an attitude, that reminds us to whom we ought to be thankful, for blessings already received, and even for challenges that do not break us, but rather make us stronger.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus, for you. I'll leave with you this blessings from the Apostle Paul, May the God of peace himself sanctify you through and through, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**