

December 11, 2011
Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24

"The Dance of Joy"

This story is told of the young Nigerian Anglican Priest, named Jeremiah, who was continuing his education to learn radio broadcasting. Jeremiah was a person whose life was filled with, exuberance and joy. He was on his way to becoming a fine pastor, because the joy in his life was not quenched by the sorrow, the sadness, the illness and the day to day suffering of the people he served. It is said, and I would agree this is most likely true, that the joy in his life was genuine because the sorrow he felt for and with his people in difficult circumstances was also genuine.

One day Jeremiah's mentor at the radio station, Ralph, was helping Jeremiah record a program of African religious music. Jeremiah was in the studio and Ralph, a white missionary from America, was in the control booth. As they copied each record to tape, Jeremiah would get up out of his seat and dance to the music, dancing all around the studio. At the end of each piece, he would never quite finish dancing in time to get back to his microphone to announce the next song in a smooth and timely way. So the recording session was continuously interrupted. Later, Ralph admonished Jeremiah to be aware that they were repeatedly running over the allotted studio time, and "It is your dancing that is causing this to happen."

Jeremiah looked at his teacher with a mixture of laughter and sadness in his eyes and said, "Ralph, the missionaries came to Africa years ago and told us the story of Jesus. But they only told us half the story. In time, we were able to read the Bible for ourselves, and we found the other half of the story. Jesus wants us to dance!"

"In my village, when people come to church, they all walk toward the church dancing. When they come to the altar to bring their offering, they are dancing. If they are not dancing, we tell them, 'Go back, find out what is wrong with your life and make it right. Then when you are dancing, come back with your offering.'"

"We have a gift for our white sisters and brothers, Jeremiah continued. It is dancing. When you have learned to dance your faith, then you will know the whole story of Jesus." (Sermon Seasonings. Ralph Milton. Wood Lake Books, 1997. pgs. 105-106)

You know, we can dance alone, in the privacy of our homes, where no one can see us. (And depending on how well we do the dance, this may

be preferable for all involved.) But it is much more fun to dance with others. And Rudy, even if you don't like to foxtrot or cut the rug, you can dance in your drawing and in your painting. Dancing, however we do it, is an expression of our joy! It is an expression of our gratitude for what God has done and is doing for us. Paul tells us not to quench the Spirit. Let it flow. Let it happen. Don't hold yourself back. Allow your joy to take on expression. Then it becomes a gift we share with others. This is what happens when someone does something for us because they want to, because they care for us, and not out of any obligation. As I think about this, I am aware that the biggest issue I see with the way we do Christmas in our society is, namely, that fine line between being, doing, giving and serving others because these things have become obligations for us, rather than expressions of love and gratitude, freely given in the dance that rises up from our souls.

These gifts marked on the Advent Wreath, Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, all flow outward from the core of our being as expressions of who we are in our realization of what God has done for us, ...our awareness of who we have become in Jesus Christ. These gifts all take the form of manifest expressions of who we are in the vast variety of dances that we dance. When I say manifest expression, I mean to say the acts of Love and the unmistakable Joyful demeanor with which we do them, making it clear to all that we are loving and joyful people at the center of our being.

Today we celebrate Joy, the pink candle, as only one expression of our gratitude. Joy flows from the depths of our souls as an irresistible response to God's gracious giving of the greatest gift ever given. If I were to ask, "What is the greatest gift ever given?" You might respond, especially during this season of Christmas, Jesus Christ! And you would certainly not be wrong. But consider this; Joseph discovered that his fiancée, Mary, was going to have a baby. Not wanting to disgrace her, he decided "to dismiss her quietly." But an angel of the Lord came to him in a dream and told him that all this was the work of the Holy Spirit and that he should not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And the angel went on to tell Joseph, when the baby is born, Joseph, "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1: 18ff.)

Perhaps one of the worst forms of emotional pain any of us ever endures is "guilt." We all know only too well what I am saying. We know of our sins. We know where we are weak. We know where we are broken, where in life we made bad choices and wrong turns. The past cannot be undone, as much as we wish it could.

How startling it is when we realize that this Child, born in a stable surrounded by cattle, sheep, goats, chickens and whatever other form of animal life might have needed shelter from the cold of the night, was born in that stable, not because there was no room in the inn (after all, there was all the room that was in the inn), but he was born in the stable because no one made room for him in the inn. And the Bread of Life for all humanity was laid in a manger, the feeding trough for animals.

And then, however slowly or quickly He comes to us, if and when we do allow Him to come in, and the Christ Child takes his rightful place at the center of our hearts, we immediately realize exactly what the greatest gift is: the forgiveness of our sins. In forgiveness we are released from the consequences of our sin. We are set free to live life in ways that are every bit as inexplicable as the gifts we try to describe and talk about: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. How do we capture the pure essence of these gifts?

Listen to the eloquence of one of the great preachers of the 20th century, the late William S. Coffin, as he describes God's gift for us: forgiveness.

"Emmanuel is "God with us," not only to comfort us in tragedy but to forgive us in our sin. Jesus doesn't approve our sins, nor does he relieve us of the consequences of them, for life is nothing if not consequential. But we are relieved of the consequences of being sinners. Through forgiveness, we are given a fresh start, new hope, a new chance to love; and if you've ever had the humility to be forgiven (guilt being the last stronghold of pride), you know that there is no joy like unto it. Forgiveness is pure gift, something for nothing. So let God make you a Christmas present of forgiveness" (The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin. Vol. 2, pg. 221.)

When you genuinely receive the Christmas present God offers, and soak in the reality of the gift God is giving you, you will have no sense of obligation that there is anything you must do to say "thank-you." Nothing is expected of you. But I will go on to tell you this, instead of any sense of obligation to do something, you will come to that place where you will not be able deny or ignore the hope and the peace that now fills your heart. You will not be able to restrain yourself from dancing, from expressing the joy you feel, and the love you have for God, for what He has done for you and for all of us. At that point, you will not be able to not say thank-you with every fiber of your being, with every act of your soul, with every dance step you take!

No one knew this better than the Apostle Paul. No peach of a guy, at least as I have perceived him, Paul was a difficult person. The passive accomplice in at least one murder, that of Stephen, no one was more hated and vilified in the eyes of Jews and Gentiles alike after his conversion. Paul had to have been living evidence that to be filled with joy did not necessarily indicate that one went around with a big smile on his face all the time, greeting everyone with happy words of acceptance and affirmation, seeing nothing but sunshine and light in the midst of raging storms. For Paul joy was received, felt and expressed as gratitude for what God had done for him and for the world in Christ Jesus.

As David Bartlett of Columbia Theological Seminary rightly points out, Paul is telling us in the closing verses of his letter to the Thessalonians that the way Christians rejoice and the way that Christians give thanks is by praying. Said another way, constant rejoicing and regular thanksgiving are themselves perpetual prayer. (David Bartlett. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol. 1, pg. 65-67)

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

(1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18)

Paul wrote these words to a congregation that was growing weary of waiting for our risen Lord to come again, as he promised he would. Well, how about us? ...living day to day with the consequences of our sin, enduring guilt, pain, suffering and grief related to every imaginable experience in life, including death and dying. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians, as he encourages us:

My sisters and brothers, in this Christmas season,
receive the Christmas present God is offering.

Let yourselves dance. Do not quench the Spirit.

Show gratitude in every aspect of your lives
for the forgiveness of your sin that God has given you.

As our Lord Jesus came to us in the infant, born in a stable in Bethlehem,
long, long ago, so will he come to us again, as he said he would,
with the power and in the glory of resurrection.

Our assurance of God's faithfulness to do this
is in the Hope, the Peace, the Joy and the Love
that fill our hearts this day. Receive God's Christmas gift for you,
and allow yourself to dance the joy filled dance of faith.