



Rejoice in the Lord

Third Sunday of Advent (Joy)

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness

December 14, 2014

Thought For The Week

Scriptures: Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11 • 2 Peter 3: 8-14 • Mark 1: 1-8

I sometimes find it interesting and instructive to try and identify some of the characteristics of the American spirit, those features or traits that seem so common to us all: Our need, for instance, to make all things simple, our tendency to want answers to questions right now; our need to keep up with the latest in communication technology, our fascination with competition. It's this last issue I find the most interesting because it affects all of us in unique ways.

An example may make this clear. I was somewhat of a talented athlete, at least in certain sports. I could get along in just about any sport but I naturally preferred baseball, basketball, football, volleyball and later in life racquetball. This was my world of my younger days. I was quite fortunate; in that my father made certain that I had the necessary sports gear to be able to play at my best. Unfortunately, he was 50 years older than me and could not do much with me. Besides, he had to work two jobs to give us the life he wanted for us. I didn't appreciate that at the time, but as I grew older, I began to admire him more and more.

But what about the other guy(s)? What was it like for someone without sporting abilities? What was it like to be the second or third string football players, when a game is close and there may never be an opportunity for them to play, at least in that game?

They were probably asking themselves why they went to all the trouble to get suited up. Unfortunately, like many things in life, some people get to play and others get to watch. When this happens over and over, of course, it can become a source of great disappointment or even depression. On the other hand, in such a situation you can also say to yourself: "I know my talents, my skills and I am ready to live with them."

Ultimately, of course, second place is never a very desirable option in any element of life. Vince Lombardi, coach of the very successful Green Bay Packers in the 60's, was often quoted as saying that "winning isn't everything; it's the only thing". That very phrase, of course, is often used as a criticism of the competitiveness of all professional sports.

Let me insist now that being first is not simply a characteristic limited to matters of the secular world, We commonly find it throughout the history of the Jewish testament and the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. The great Jewish prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea and others constantly complained of the "climbers" in Jewish religious society, the high priest, scribes and Pharisees who expected places of honor and polite respect.

They wished to be easily recognized, wearing their respectable and decorative religious clothing and symbols of distinction. All the while, of course, they were simply trying to escalate their own importance.

Jesus, in his debates with the scribes and Pharisees makes the same point: "They wait on street

corners for recognition but do little to serve the needs the people in regard to justice and charity”

At this point, however, we suddenly meet the last and the greatest of the prophets; he was known not only for his biting condemnation of the religious elite (brood of vipers, polished tombs) he called them.

He did not limit his criticism only to the religious leaders, however. To all who came out to the Jordan River to hear this fiery preacher, he demanded an entire change of life, repentance, and a call for works of justice and kindness, concern for the poor.

We all know him, of course, not only by his repentant preaching, but also by his repentant lifestyle: camels' hair clothing, locusts for a luncheon entrée, wild honey for dessert. He is none other than the famous John the Baptist.

What makes the Baptist unique, however, is that not only was he a relative of Jesus, but from a early age, he spoke of himself the forerunner of Jesus, the “advance man” of the Messiah. Ultimately, however, he learned that he was destined for second place; hence, he was willing to step aside, stand back, so that Jesus could preach the good news of the kingdom.

So, in John the Baptist we have one of the best examples of a person who was unashamed to be considered “second best.” “He must increase, I must decrease,” he would say. So, we learn from the Baptist’s admission that he knew he was not destined to be the Messiah and was willing, therefore to point out the very one destined for that role in history.

So, what should one make of all this? Several points: First of all, we should thank God every day of our life for the giftedness of our human nature, physical, mental and spiritual.

Secondly, there is no reason for us to immediately begin comparing ourselves to someone else; each of us is distinctly unique: no two persons on this planet possess the exact same endowments; each of us is blessed and holy in his/her own unique way.

Finally, perhaps it might be a nice idea to do what athletes often do when they have finished a well-fought game. They get in line and give each other a firm hand clasp, a “high five” or congratulate the opposing player for having won or tried hard to win. It is a simple sign as though to say: “let’s praise God for having done our best with what God gives us.” I would guess that there must be something deeply spiritual about all that. Even (or especially) John the Baptist might agree on that point.

Prayer For The Week

God, we offer humble praise for your promise of peace that brings hope to the hopeless and joy to the joyless.

God, we recognize our need for your peace in our lives. Forgive us our shortcomings and guide us as we accept the responsibility of sharing your peace with others.

We uphold for your blessing of peace the people of Cape Verde. We seek your blessing of wholeness and healing for all people who struggle through difficult living conditions. Open our eyes to the needs of those in our own communities and in our world, who suffer from the injustice of hunger and poverty. Grant us the courage and compassion to reach out with loving hands and generous hearts wherever there is need.

Thank you, God, for hope in knowing your promise of peace is born over and again in the hearts of all who receive your generous and amazing gift.

Hear our collective prayers, God of peace, that your peace may become the peace of this world. Amen.

Stewardship Thought For The Week

The practice of being a Biblical disciple is the art of shaping the life of an individual into a growing partnership with God. It begins with assurance of salvation through the acceptance of the Gospel, and then continues integrating Christ's lordship into every area of daily life.

A disciple is one who walks with, learns from, and lives in submission to a master, to become like the master.

Stewardship described through discipleship is, therefore, the lifestyle of one who has a living relationship with Jesus Christ, accepts His lordship, walks with God and works in partnership with Him; acting as His agent to manage His affairs on earth.