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Oct

Rejoice in the Lord!

Pressing On

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

Joy gives us sustenance to maintain life, hope, resilience, and perseverance, even in the most impossible circumstances. Joy isn't an escape.

REFERENCES

Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus Text: **Philippians 4:1-9**

“Always” is a hard word. In many ways, it’s an inhuman word. *Always*. Who says that? How do we guarantee “always” in a temporary kind of world? Who knows what might be next? I heard about a wedding couple who wanted to change the vows from “until death do us part” to “as long as love shall last.” Now, it is possible that they meant *always*, that they were confident in that love. It was an Irving Berlin kind of love. (Yes, I AM old.)

“I’ll be loving you Always / with a love that’s true Always / when the things you’ve planned / need a helping hand / I will understand Always.” (Writer: Irving Berlin. Copyright: Lyrics © Kanjian Music, BMG)

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Maybe that is what the couple meant when they wanted to change the vows to “as long as love will last.” Maybe they were proclaiming an Irving Berlin kind of love. Always. Too old for you? How about a Jon Bon Jovi love?

“And I will love you, baby - Always / And I'll be there forever and a day - Always / I'll be there till the stars don't shine / Till the heavens burst and / The words don't rhyme / And I know when I die, you'll be on my mind / And I'll love you - Always.”

Writer: Jon Bon Jovi. Copyright: Lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Spirit Music Group

Okay, Bon Jovi isn't necessarily current either. But, Berlin or Bon Jovi, *always* is still a big word, a romantic word, not a very practical word. *Always*—not a very doable word. *Always*—for now, that fits, that works. For a while, we can handle that. But who has the capacity to say “always”? Not me. And I suspect, not you. Am I right?

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice (Philippians 4:4 NRSV).

Dang it, Paul. Why'd you throw that word in there? That unreachable, impossible word? That “always” word. Take that word out, and this is a nice little passage about being happy, finding your joy, walking on the sunny side of life. “It's got a nice beat, and you can dance to it.” A spoonful of sugar, all that sort of stuff. But no, you weren't happy with that. You wanted something more, something deeper. You wanted something (dare I say it?) eternal.

Cover one eye and read this without that scary word. Just for a moment. “Rejoice in the Lord.” Well, of course! Who would say no to that? “Again, I say rejoice.” Sure, keep reminding me; I need the boost. I also need to be reminded of the source of this joy: “Rejoice in the Lord.” Certainly, I can do that. I have done that. I remember a time when there was joy in the Lord, in worship, in fellowship. Sure, it happens. Been there, done that.

And then, Paul says, let it spill out. That joy in the Lord is not just for you, not just so that you get a boost, a lift, a skip in your step. Let it come out. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” *Gentleness?* Hmm. I'm not sure that's the best word, actually. It's a good word, but not the best. It doesn't quite convey what Paul is getting at here. “Patience,” some say, “forbearance,” if anyone uses that word anymore; “magnanimity,” if you want a real tongue twister. Peterson's *The Message*

says, “Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them.” ^[2]I like that. An earlier paraphrase said, “Let all the world know that you’ll meet them half-way.” It’s about hospitality, welcome, inclusion; it’s about the fact that we aren’t the judge; we don’t point fingers; we don’t accuse; we dropped our stones long ago, even since Jesus told us that only the sinless can throw them. We aren’t looking to pick fights, to call names. What we have to share is joy—joy in the Lord. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” Everyone? Paul almost slipped in an “always” there, didn’t he? Everyone. Hmmm.

Don’t worry about anything. Yeah, ok, thanks, Paul. But no thanks. I mean, how in the world are we going to do that? It’s one thing to know we aren’t supposed to worry, but how do we stop? And then, because we can’t stop, we end up worrying about worrying.

I guess that’s why there is a comma there and not a period. “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” “Don’t worry,” says Paul, but get on your knees. Don’t worry, but pour it out. Don’t worry, but beg and plead and pound on the doorways of heaven with both fists, even as you know—not hope, not assume, but know—that you are heard and that answers are already all around you when you open your eyes again and put one foot in front of the other. Don’t worry because you don’t have time to worry, you are so busy bending God’s divine ear. Don’t worry because your life is now a prayer, and the answers are coming fast and furious and surprising.

Don’t worry, because from somewhere comes this sense that maybe, just maybe, you are not alone in the universe—this sense that maybe you do have a place, a home, an identity, an existence right here and right now that is meaningful, useful, transformed, and transforming. From somewhere, who knows where, God, it must be, comes a peace that even on your best days you can’t define or even describe. It just is, passing all understanding, or your understanding anyway. Where does it come from?

Choose joy. *Rejoice in the Lord. Always.* We’ve come back to that. It is still there. We can squint it away only so long. We can ignore it only for a time. *Rejoice in the Lord, always.* Maybe we could negotiate with Paul. Rejoice in the Lord, when it is convenient. Rejoice in the Lord, when we’ve got the time, when we’re in the mood, when the world hasn’t taken yet another sideswipe at my confidence. Rejoice in the Lord when I’ve run out of excuses not to. *Rejoice in the Lord ... Always. Always?*

How do we do that? Focus on the next one? No, focus more deeply on this one. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is

pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Think on, dwell on, meditate on, take your cue from, be obsessed with these things. Look at the list: *True, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy*. What is that? Who is that? Implied in the directive is the confidence that there is enough of this out there to fill us up, and not only fill us up but give us joy—real joy, in the Lord joy. Always joy. Paul says, “Go find Christ in the world.” Go find the one you love, the one who loves you, focus on that, and you will know joy.

The fruit of the Spirit is love that then brings us into joy, the joy of the Lord, always. Always.

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