

3rd Sunday of Advent - December 17, 2017

There's a word that pops up over and over again in today's Liturgy. At the outset, in the Entrance Antiphon it's there. Since we sang an entrance hymn, we did not recite it - but there it is at the top of the page of our day's readings - "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice." It's quoting St. Paul as he wrote to the Philippians. It's from the Latin form of that word, "Rejoice" - "Gaudete" - that we get the traditional name for this day: "Gaudete Sunday." Gaudete is the imperative, a command even, to REJOICE! And the call to rejoice, the theme of joy, runs thick in today's Mass. In addition to the entrance antiphon already noted, we get the following . . .

"I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul . . ." That's from Isaiah in the First Reading. Our Responsorial Psalm went, "My Soul Rejoices in the Lord." It echoes the Magnificat, the great hymn of praise and thanksgiving of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Gospel of St. Luke. In the second reading we hear from St. Paul again, this time writing to the Thessalonians, where he urges them to, "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances, give thanks."

It may seem a bit odd, then, to get "rejoicing" and "joy" all the way through the first readings, only to run into John the Baptist again at the Gospel. Rejoice! Joy! And then . . . "Repent!" Remember last week? We spent a

bit of time reflecting on the Baptist's call to repent. What gives? Well, I would suggest that repenting and rejoicing can go hand in hand, when properly understood. In fact, in our current state of a fallen, broken, wounded world, they don't just happen to go hand in hand - our rejoicing can well **DEPEND** on our repenting . . . and our repenting can open us up to a whole new life of rejoicing. Let me give you an idea about what rejoicing - borne of repenting - can actually look like, because I have seen it. I've experienced it . . .

Lake Ontario. My uncle's camp on the lakeshore. A summer's day, bright sunshine. Probably 30 or 40 people laughing, swimming, playing cards. Playing yard games like tag, frisbee, badminton, catch, and jarts (*Remember jarts? Unbelievable! You have to be a certain age to remember jarts, since I think they're illegal today. They were "lawn darts" - weighted darts [a couple pounds, anyway] - with fins, about 18 inches in length, meant to be tossed high up in the air with the goal of having them stick into the ground, landing in or near a target ring some distance away in the yard. "Here kids, take these weighted hand-javelins and toss them around in the yard!" Thankfully, we didn't put out any eyes or worse with them!*). Cooking out, and eating a lot, and then playing and swimming some more. Kids running all over the place, screaming and laughing, and especially screaming and laughing loudly if some of the grown-ups got involved in the action, which they always did. Those are all images in my memory - and I am deeply grateful to have them. One particular weekend at that camp each summer in the early 70's was always especially fun and memorable to me - it was a weekend with a particular group of my parents' friends and their families, which my brothers and sister and I always looked forward to - it was so much fun.

My dad always enjoyed telling a story about something that happened on one of those weekends. He said toward the end of one of those days, a guy from the camp next door, standing at the edge of the property, called him over. He wanted to tell my dad that “I’ve been watching your party all day, and I just have to say, I’ve never seen a group of so many people laughing and having such a good time, so much fun - just drinking coffee.”

You see, what that guy didn’t know, and what I haven’t told you yet, was that everybody there - well the adults anyway - were recovering alcoholics. Or spouses of recovering alcoholics, mostly involved and active members of Al-Anon.

And I think, in hindsight now, that a particular quality that characterized the great delight of those times for me with those people in that setting - a quality that permeated the whole atmosphere, was JOY . . . a joy that came from a deep sense of relief, along with a lived knowledge that they had all received happiness, a second chance at life, and were having a good time - even as they knew they didn’t really deserve it. These people (my dad and uncle I know for sure had this attitude) - they knew they had messed things up. They had walked - in some cases quite literally - right up to the very brink of death. And in some instances they were still living with very hard consequences of their addictive behavior - but they had turned a corner on life (by God’s grace), and were living a new life, full of gratitude. A new life. A freer life. A life that was recognized as an astounding gift, borne of a generosity that they could hardly imagine. They had a new lease on life, a second chance, living without drinking. Living and striving to be more

about serving others and not just themselves. And by living that way, they could discover a joy like they had never experienced before. They were living with a sense of relief and astonished joy that life really was worth living, and that they could enjoy this life with - and for - each other, helping each other along the way to a healthier, sane, clean, and sober life, “one day at a time.” They all had their own stories to tell, their own baggage to deal with, their own weaknesses, failures, and frailties, their own nightmarish memories of addiction and suffering - and their own moments of clarity that they were given, with just the right people at just the right time who helped them to “get over themselves,” and to start living sobriety, not taking that first drink, just one day at a time.

I know it now - I didn't then. I know now that the joy I was experiencing as a child in the presence of this group of deeply wounded people who were helping each other along the path of a better life - that joy was a gift from God who generously gave them new life, even after they had “destroyed” their lives with drinking. They had received new life. They were “drinking” of this new life - this sober life - to the full. And that joyful existence together as something of a community was remarkable, and startling enough to cause our neighbor to notice, and say to my dad: “I've never seen so many people having such a great time together - just drinking coffee!”

What I experienced, and caught a glimpse of those many years ago, I beg God for the grace to reproduce here in our parish.

I want people outside our parish to be like that guy on the edge of my uncle's camp, looking at us - looking at our parish - and asking, "what is it with you people? Why are you so happy and joyful? I want that!" I want us all to know, at the very depths of our being, that we have all been to the brink of an awful fate, and have been saved - and are each day being saved again - by Jesus Christ. I want us all to know, TO REALLY KNOW - not merely an intellectual acceptance of the idea, but a deep-down-to-the-marrow and depth of soul knowledge - that we've been given a new life, and we are given to drink of His Holy Spirit to live this new life that only God can give, each day.

That's what I mean when I say I want *a parish full of people who are engaged and joyful and growing in their relationship with Christ and contagious with this faith . . .*

To be a parish full of "engaged and joyful" people is describing a group of disciples who KNOW they have been saved by the blood of Christ, and have been brought back from the brink of eternal death, and are now living a life of profound relief, joy, and gratitude for this new lease on life that we have received - and we are willing to share that gift of new life with all our fellow wounded travelers in this hurting world, this valley of tears - no matter who they are; no matter where they come from; no matter what they have done. They should all know they are invited, they are welcomed, they belong, and they are given an opportunity to experience this new life in Christ and His Spirit. Every day. One day at a time.

That's what I want. That's the vision. But I can't just say it and make it so. Thankfully, God can. Which is why we continue to pray with humble persistence on Wednesdays at 6:30pm at Sacred Heart. To pray for a parish renewal - to pray for an openness to the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts and in our lives. To pray for a deep realization that we are all wounded, and living among a wounded population - and that we have access to the Divine Physician who alone can heal and give new life.

Again, hear St. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians:

*“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.
In all circumstances give thanks . . . ”*

We have reason to rejoice. We have reason to pray. We have reason to give thanks. WE HAVE BEEN SAVED, AND AT A COST BEYOND MEASURE. It's because of this that we can move toward our vision, our destination - to create an atmosphere that constantly exudes a joy and gratitude which can only come from the knowledge that we have indeed been rescued and given new life . . . and others, like that neighbor at my uncle's camp, observing a bunch of recovering alcoholics enjoying a sober life together, will be moved to ask: “what is it about you that makes you so joyful? I'd like some of that myself.”

God - grant us the grace to squarely face our own brokenness, our own wounds, our own failures. God, grant us the grace to accept your mercy, and to know your mercy through and through. And with a real posture of humble gratitude and joy, Lord, may we then go out to meet this deeply wounded, deeply addicted, and profoundly sad world, carrying Your love and Your mercy that we have first received. Thus may we form and build a

culture to make You visible and present - and invite others to partake of Your healing, Your joy, Your love and Your life. Thus may we be . . .

A parish full of people who are engaged and joyful and growing in their relationship with Christ, and contagious with this faith . . . Amen.