

Eric Dupee

December 13, 2020

Year B, Advent 3, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

“Three Essential Habits”

We have a letter from the Apostle Paul. It's addressed to the church in Thessaloniki, but I think it was meant to be shared more broadly. Paul sends his regards. He wishes he could visit. I hope you'll read the entire letter at your convenience, but, today, there's just a short piece I want to share with you.

I was taken aback when I read these words. Honestly, what he suggested seemed preposterous. See what you think of this. Paul wrote, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Do you see what I mean? Rejoice **always**? Pray **without ceasing**...like nonstop? Give thanks in **all** circumstances? Seriously, Paul? I appreciate the enthusiasm. We all know that rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks are good things to do, but always? Without ceasing? In all circumstances?

Assuming you'd be as troubled by this as me, on behalf of all of us at First Parish Church, I took the liberty of writing back. Allow me to share my letter in response to Paul. It's a little rough. It was just a draft. The letter reads:

Eric-Senior Minister, on behalf of Associate Pastor Daniel, Jan the Moderator, Deacon Susan, Jeff the Assessor, and all members and friends of First Parish Church, to the Apostle Paul: Grace to you and peace.

Brother Paul, it is with all due respect that I write these words. In no way is this intended to be a rejection of your instructions. Heaven forbid! Think of this response more as an exercise in managing expectations. I'm referring specifically to the section of your letter in which you wrote, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

You may not be aware of this, but we're in the midst of a global pandemic in which, in our country alone, hundreds of thousands of people have died. Hospitals are reaching capacity. Hospital staff are stressed and vulnerable. Families are separated. Grandparents are unable to hug their grandchildren.

This year has brought many of us to our breaking point. People have suffered with job loss. Many are struggling with food insecurity. There are lines of people at food banks stretching as far as the eye can see. A nearby 16-year-old boy died by suicide after struggling with the isolation of the pandemic. Therefore, I'm sure you can understand that the instruction to “rejoice always” may come across to some of our church members as slightly tone deaf.

Regarding your instruction to pray without ceasing, allow me to familiarize you with the culture in which First Parish Church is located. It's a little embarrassing to admit, but

many of us are not in the habit of praying. In fact, at First Parish Church, we like to leave the praying to the professionals. Our pastors are our designated prayers.

Many among us have never learned how to pray. We worry about saying the wrong thing. To be totally honest, most have trouble sitting still and focusing long enough to pray. There are some among us who can't even remember the last time we prayed. So, although your instruction to "pray without ceasing" would make perfect sense in some communities of faith, for us it just seems a bit much.

Finally, about this notion of giving thanks in all circumstances. If I may push back ever so gently, surely you don't mean ALL circumstances. With all due respect, surely you don't expect us to give thanks when the test result comes back positive. Surely you don't expect us to give thanks when depression overwhelms us. Surely you don't expect us to give thanks when circumstances rob us of our dignity.

Perhaps, Brother Paul, you can take comfort in knowing we have a holiday based on giving thanks. Every year, we take a whole day and dedicate it to expressing our gratitude. To our credit, it's one of our favorite holidays. As wonderfully aspirational as it might be to "give thanks in all circumstances," we're just not sure.

That's where I began to draw my letter to a close. I folded it and put it in the drawer overnight. That night, as laid in bed, I began to think about Paul. I remembered that he was no stranger to hardship. In fact, it's incredible what he was able to endure. More than once, he was thrown in prison. He was flogged. He was beaten with rods. He was stoned. He was shipwrecked three times.

I recalled an instance in which Paul and his companion Silas were in jail. While the other prisoners were downcast and sullen, Paul and Silas began praying and singing songs of praise. Talk about rejoicing always and praying without ceasing. Even in jail and shackled, Paul rejoiced, prayed, and gave thanks.

Suddenly, there was an earthquake. The foundations of the prison were shaken, the doors flew open and everyone's chains were unfastened. When I thought about that, it occurred to me, maybe Paul understood something that I didn't. Rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks, are not just things we do when things are going well. They are habits that sustain us when things are bad.

Maybe Paul wants us to be in the habit of rejoicing, because the act of rejoicing lifts the spirit when we need it most. Rejoice always, because keeping one's spirit up is necessary to endure the hardships of life.

Pray without ceasing, because prayer is our connection to God. Prayer is how we stay connected to our power source. Maintain that vital connection. Don't go too long without plugging in to your source.

Give thanks in all circumstances, because if you can find something for which to be grateful, it gives you a reason to go on. It can be a reminder that God has not left you to face your troubles alone.

When I woke the next morning, the first thing I did was read in my Advent devotional book. The author recalled a story of when he was a young youth leader. At that time in his life, he was worried about his future. In a conversation with his pastor, the pastor said, “John, do you know why a bluebird finds worms? Because that’s what she looks for.”

At that moment, I realized I couldn’t send my letter. I got out a pen and some paper and wrote a second draft. Here’s the letter I’m actually sending:

Dear Paul,

Thank you so much for your words of instruction and encouragement. This Christmas, we, at First Parish Church, are going to dedicate ourselves to looking for reasons to rejoice and to give thanks. We will challenge ourselves to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances, not because life is always good, not in an effort to ignore terrible circumstances, but as the means to sustain ourselves in the midst of them.

It is our hope that in being a rejoicing, praying, and thankful community, Christ’s light will shine through us. Merry Christmas, Paul! We will take your words to heart. Give our love to Sylvanus and Timothy.

Your Fellow Prisoners of Hope,

The Members and Friends of First Parish Church