

“When Life Gives You Lemons...”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, November 12, 2023

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Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 [NRSV]

OPENING

- (*Like Fred Craddock’s “hyperbole sermon”: *)
Really? Joyful always? Pray without ceasing? Give thanks in all things? Really?! Am I the only one who thinks that’s just a little far-fetched? ... I mean...

(*First part of the story about our first pilgrimage to the Holy Land and missing the tour bus in Bethlehem as it left for Jerusalem. Make a big deal out of the predicament we were in and the \$45 cab ride(!) to meet up with our group.*) “Be joyful always?” *Are you kidding me?!*

Or...How many times in a week, after a powerful time of morning devotion, do I get to lunchtime with no ability to recall what that morning devotion was about?! “Pray continuously?” *Really?!*

(*Or...story of my backing the car out of the garage with the door half-open...*) Thankful in all circumstance? *Are you kidding me?!* I have to confess to you that “Oh, thanks be to God...” was NOT what first came out of my mouth!

- Being *joyful* always; *praying* continuously; and *giving thanks* in all things? That’s sounds just a little far-fetched, don’t you think?

SERMON THOUGHTS

- (*Move toward the altar table with the lemons on it. Cut and squeeze the lemon halves into a jar or glass as you’re talking...*)
I mean there’s a lot of bitterness all around us – and all around the world:
 - The Russian war on Ukraine and western democracy...
 - Political divisiveness – locally *and* nationally – like we haven’t seen in decades...
 - Mass shootings happening with such frequency and deadliness that the report of another hardly fazes us anymore...
 - Stories of people getting COVID around us again almost bringing on a PTSD response – sending us scrambling for our masks and test kits all over again!
 - And we only need to say the words “Israel” and “Gaza” to start heads shaking in horrifying disbelief over the carnage taking place there now.
 - So, whose idea was it, anyway, to put a holiday like *Thanksgiving* right in the middle of all this? It’s like taking this jar of lemon juice and serving it up as a bad after-dinner dessert drink! (*Feign a drink with disgust!*)

“Be joyful *always*? Pray *continuously*? Give thanks *in all things*?” Really, Paul?! That’s sounds just a little far-fetched, don’t you think?

BIG TRANSITION

- (*Return to the story of Kim’s and my missing the tour bus from the hotel in Bethlehem on our 3rd day in the Holy Land.*) That experience, while scary, opened our eyes to the reality of life for the Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank. And I think now of the Israeli families living through unimaginable heart-sickness for loved ones who were killed or taken hostage into Gaza by Hamas five weeks ago. Our experience back then helps me to feel some measure of solidarity with people living in fear and terror anywhere in the world. And though we were chided good-naturedly by our fellow pilgrims and the tour guide the whole rest of the trip, I’m glad it happened. (*Putting a tablespoon of sugar into the jar of lemon juice...*) “*Be thankful – in all circumstances...*” Humh...
- And if we think of prayer as the awareness of God in our midst, the engagement with the sacred all around us, a celebration of sacramental living in our everyday lives (*Putting a tablespoon of sugar into the jar of lemon juice...*) “*Pray continuously...*” Humh...
- As I was reflecting on this sermon, my mind kept going over the painful experiences of my life – the losses that have occurred, beginning at a very young age. And I couldn’t help but think that the

underlying effect of all of them has not been despair but HOPE. Hope! Hope based on the conviction that God, while not in the business of sparing me from painful experiences, IS in the business of journeying with me through them with the intent of turning them into goodness (Paul and Romans 8:28). Hope bringing a sense of contentment and peace that somehow, and in some way, God will redeem those losses and bring their darkness into the light of resurrection.

And when I stop and think about that, I experience a deep sense of joy. (*Putting a tablespoon of sugar into the jar of lemon juice...*) “*Be joyful always...*” Humh...

CONCLUSION

And you know...when I think about it, maybe Paul’s exhortation to “be joyful always, to pray continuously, and to give thanks in all circumstances” isn’t a command from either

- an out-of-touch-with-reality religious nut OR
- a sadistic God who cares nothing about the human condition and demands responses from us that are completely out-of-synch with our suffering and angst.

What if, instead of a command, we read Paul’s exhortation as an invitation? *An invitation* to live life in a certain way, to be a certain kind of person – a person of *trust*... (*pouring water into the lemon-and-sugar mixture and stirring*)...

- *Trust* – in the goodness of God. After all, the Psalmist invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8)
- *Trust* – in God’s desire for us to have life and to have it in abundance...despite its bitterness sometimes.
- *Trust* – in God’s ability to transform our experiences of hopelessness and despair into testimonies of triumph and the overcoming of bitterness...
- *Trust* – in God’s abiding presence with us, come what may.
- *Trust* – in God’s ability to make, well, lemons into lemonade. (*Hold up the jar of lemonade with a “cheers-like” motion to the congregation.*)

And if we live life in this way, as people of trust in God, then *joy*, *prayer*, and *thanksgiving* do end up characterizing us more and more, maybe even *continuously*.

And maybe that’s what Paul means when he talks about this being God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. Far-fetched? (*shrugging gesture*)

(*Take a big swig of the lemonade...*)
 “Humh... Needs ice...”

Let’s pray together...

BENEDICTION:

Far-fetched or not, I pray the week ahead holds an abundance of joy, prayer, and thanksgiving for you and all those you love. Who knows...? Maybe even all of that continuously!