

Rejoice – Always!

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Third Sunday of Advent  
Rejoice Sunday  
December 17, 2017

“Rejoice always.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:16

You heard during Donna’s welcome this morning that today is Rejoice Sunday, which probably means very little to most of us because Advent means relatively little to most of us. Even in churches such as ours, where we preserve the basic form of the church year, if I asked you what Advent means you’d probably say it means the period of waiting prior to Christmas.

Okay, that would get you perhaps a C or C+ because that’s an average answer. A better answer would be to say that Advent is that season of preparation, when we await not only Christ’s coming as the historical baby known as Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, but also the eschatological coming of the Christ at the end of time that we read about in Matthew’s gospel the week before Advent began.

Okay, now you’re up in the B range of answers, especially in a liberal church like ours, because we liberals have largely jettisoned from our religion anything that smacks of judgment, on the one hand, or supernaturalism, on the other. Many of us in progressive churches have become so focused on righting the wrongs of this world or seeing the beauty in creation that we’ve forgotten that our faith teaches us that what we see is not all that there is. There is, within and beneath and beyond this natural, physical world, another world for which we use the shorthand word “God.”

Most of us automatically think of a great big person when we hear the word God, but God is actually a world, a reality, a realm -- the realm of God. When Jesus preached the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, he was simply preaching God, that reality that is more than this reality. That’s the main thing the word and the reality God does for us – God reminds us that this world is not the only world there is.

And that brings us to the third level of answer you might give if someone asked you what Advent means, because Advent also means the complete coming of Christ, the embodiment of God’s world, in our midst right now, in all the richness and splendor and grace and glory that the title Christ means.

This is the Christ of whom John speaks in the opening words of his gospel when he says, “And we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). The third thing that we are waiting for in Advent is for the reality of the Christ to become our reality, the eternal normal of the Word made flesh to become our new normal, right here, right now. We are waiting for us to embody the realm of God in the realms of this world, one soul at a time. This is the waiting we’re doing for ourselves, not for God. This is that

necessary waiting that we have to endure while we continue the work in progress that is our true, spiritual self.

Now listen to me carefully, because it would be easy to misunderstand the last thing I said. When I refer to our true, spiritual selves, I'm not talking about a second self separate from the common-sense self that we think of first when we think of ourselves. There aren't two of us. We only get one life, in this world or in any world to come, and when that one physical-spiritual life is so animated by God's Holy Spirit that it no longer manifests as its essence its physical nature, but rather manifests as its essence the eternal truths of grace, mercy, and peace that I've often preached to you, then that self becomes its true, spiritual self, and death becomes powerless to control it.

That's the third thing we're waiting for in Advent – for us to become the selves that God intends for all human selves to be. We wait for that and God waits for that. That's what I preached to you two weeks ago when my text was Paul's words to the Corinthians, "God is faithful." The first sign of God's faithfulness is our creation; the second sign of God's faithfulness is God's waiting for us to cooperate with God's Spirit to become the creations that God wills for us to be. God's patience is a sign of God's love.

So if you want to get an A or an A+ when someone asks you what Advent means, tell them all three of the things for which we wait – the re-minding of ourselves and the world of the coming of the historical figure of Jesus, the eschatological anticipation of the Human One who shows us what it means to be human, and the spiritual longing for the full presence of the Christ who dwells in each of us in varying degrees but always incompletely in this world of time and space. Tell people that's what Advent means, and that'll get you an A.

It'll also remind you why Paul could tell the Christians at Thessalonica to "rejoice always," which I have taken as my text on this Rejoice Sunday. Paul told the Thessalonian Christians to rejoice always because of the belief they shared with Paul – and with us – that the Christ is coming into our midst. That we have not been abandoned, that the principalities and powers of this world will not, ultimately, prevail. All of the first Christians, who had experienced the power of the resurrection as few of us have, believed that the world of brute force, power politics, and scheming and conniving operators was passing away because God had inaugurated a new age in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

That belief was the heart of early Christianity, and that made Christians then – and it can make Christians now – rejoice and rejoice always. Christian rejoicing does not come from history; it comes from faith. It does not come from circumstances, it comes from conviction. It does not come from what happens to you; it comes from what God has promised for you and for your world. Christians rejoice not because of what has happened or what they see happening; they rejoice because of their belief – their rock-solid conviction – that all things work together for good for those who love God and who are called to God's purpose (Rom. 8:28). That is a belief, and that belief is the source of Christian rejoicing.

And that's why, my dear Christian friends, you need to dig deep into your belief, your faith. To rejoice always requires grounding in the Christian's trust that no matter how bad things get, God's will for good will not ultimately be defeated. That's what our Christian story tells us – that's what the empty cross reminds us – but that story only works for people who know it, who love it, who believe it, and who live it.

Now I know perfectly well that it's hard to rejoice even some of the time, let alone always. I read the news. I know what's out there. The story of the world is one of endless mess. We get one mess cleaned up – chattel slavery, for instance – and another mess erupts, such as the Holocaust of the last century or the outbreaks of ethnic cleansing that continue to scar so much of the globe. If it's not one group being abused, it's another group being assaulted. We waged a second Gulf War because we were told Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, and now we're inching closer and closer to a war with North Korea for the same reason. Cycles of bloodshed, misery, and suffering. It's the world's story and it's an old, old story.

And yet, in the midst of our self-inflicted maiming and mayhem, we catch glimpses of another story, another world, that world that exists right now and is also yet to come. That's the world announced by and prepared for in Advent.

A couple Saturdays ago, a group of us from Faith went to hear the annual holiday concert of the North Coast Men's Chorus downtown. One of the songs the men sang was entitled "Not In Our Town," which told the story of the 10,000 menorahs that appeared in windows all across Billings, Montana, in 1993, after a group of white supremacists began a campaign of hate literature, vandalism, and terrorism against Jews, African-Americans, GLBT people, and other minorities. Margaret MacDonald and her pastor, Keith Torney, of the First Congregational United Church of Christ of Billings, responded to the hate-mongering by starting their own campaign of peaceful co-existence and mutual respect by urging all of their friends and neighbors, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to display paper menorahs in their windows during the Christmas and Hanukkah seasons. Thousands of ordinary people did so, and the town of Billings launched a nationwide movement called Not In Our Town, which is a citizens network to counter bigotry, discrimination, and prejudice. One person can make a difference. One person can open a window onto that world of God's realm for which we wait.

Make no mistake, friends: things can get very, very bad. If history teaches us nothing else, it certainly teaches us that. And no country, no political party, no religion, or no ethnic group is immune from colluding in abominations.

Thanks in part to folks like Richard Gere, we westerners tend to think of Buddhism in terms of gentleness and peacefulness and understanding, much like the Dalai Lama, one of the world's great peacemakers. But even as I speak, the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority living in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, continue to suffer persecution at the hands of their Buddhist neighbors. According to Doctors Without Borders, between August 25<sup>th</sup> and September 24<sup>th</sup> of this year, at least 6,700 Rohingya people – men, women, and children – were killed in the state of Rakhine in what the government of Myanmar calls a crackdown on illegal immigrants. Buddhist monks, in their maroon and saffron robes, have joined in nationalist marches and violence against the Rohingya, claiming that the Rohingya are Muslim extremists intent on destroying Burmese Buddhism. Buddhists can be just as violent and intolerant as Christians, Muslims, or Jews.

And here in Ohio, we know what an anti-illegal-immigration philosophy looks like. People who were brought to this country decades ago by their parents fleeing the poverty and violence of Mexico are now being deported to a country they've never called home. Our government is using any and every excuse to deport people who have grown up here, been

educated here, worked here, paid taxes here, supported civic and religious organizations here, and contributed to the welfare of their neighborhoods and communities here. And the only crime these folks have committed is that their status isn't legal as our government defines legal.

This is wrong. It may be legal, but it's wrong, and Christians cannot hide behind the smokescreen of legality. Governments do horrible things legally all the time. The government of Nazi Germany came to power legally, changed the laws of Germany legally, and unleashed a hell on earth legally. The government of South Africa legally enforced apartheid for decades. And until 1967, it was illegal in the state of Virginia for a white person to marry anybody who wasn't white. Legality is nothing to which Christians should pledge their allegiance.

Our allegiance, rather, is to the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and to the God made manifest in that crucified and risen savior. Jesus is not the only way God has been present in our world – I hope none of you would expect me to suggest that – but in Jesus the Christ we see what it means to be human, which is why Jesus called himself simply the Human One. The cross tells us what legality can do to Human Ones – Pilate was simply exercising his judicial discretion in crucifying an insurrectionist, perfectly legal – and the cross' emptiness tell us what God's power can do when we have done our legal worst.

The empty cross, the empty tomb, and Christian hearts and minds made real and true by the reality of resurrected faith – they tell the true tale. The words of the news, the words of the commentators, the words of the chattering classes – they'll all pass away soon enough. The word of our God, however, as the prophet Isaiah told us so many centuries ago, will endure forever. God's word is the last word and that word is love.

We believe that, and we rejoice in that – now, in Advent, and always.