Thanks In All Circumstances

Psalm 100 Kimby Young

Ephesians 1:15-23 November 19, 2023

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I think I am ready for Thanksgiving this week, and the holiday season that follows. I’m not hosting – so that makes it easier for me than for some of you. I am aware this will be a very different year for me after the unexpected death of my sister this summer. As a family we are making plans, but know there will be some moments of grief alongside the celebration. This week is such a mix of moods – really for everyone. A lot of joy and excitement. A little sadness or loneliness. For some even fear or reluctance if you are seeing someone who is difficult to get along with. It also can be stressful if your finances are stretched or your time is not under your own control. Or if there is some other complication. And that’s just this week, not to mention the entire month and a half of expectations till the new year. Some of us are giggling. Some of us are praying. Some of us are already exhausted. Some of you have already finished your shopping and planning. Notice I swapped to you on that last one because I am definitely not in the finished with preparations category. All of this is to say, I started thinking about everyone in this room today and how differently we all might be feeling – the mix of moods. Even within myself alone I am a mix of conflicting emotions. We are not all in the same place. What might God want to say to us today in light of that great diversity? What should I preach? What is God’s word for each of us today?

The verse that kept running through my head is the short passage from Thessalonians.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Usually, when I have heard these verses in the past the advice leapt to mind – the verbs – rejoice, pray, give thanks – an attitude and a way of life. Be positive. Focus on God. But this time I read these verses, the modifiers rang loud and clear for me. Always. Without ceasing. In all circumstances. The message to me was very personal this year. No matter what you are feeling – focus on God. Always. Without ceasing. In all circumstances. Even if I am missing my sister this year – find reason to rejoice. Look for the joy. God will give it to you. Even if you are lonely or sad or afraid or confused, appreciate God’s love all around you. Even if you are struggling, perhaps especially if you are struggling, reach out to God in prayer and listen for God’s voice. God will speak clearly whatever your circumstance. And if you are excited and happy and joyful and blessed. If you are abundantly aware of the goodness in your life and the gifts all around you. Well, even more, rejoice, pray, give thanks. For this is the will of God. This is what God wants for you. Joy, connection, gratitude, abundance, life.

When I was in seminary we were told that in preaching we should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The problem with that challenge is that the comfortable and the afflicted are sitting right side by side in the same pew. Now you’re looking at each other and wondering, aren’t you. But really, in my experience, the problem is that we hear the wrong message. Those who need comfort hear the challenge and don’t think they are good enough. While those who are comfortable and could use some stirring up, think the challenge is meant for everyone else.

Besides I am much better at bringing the comfort than the affliction. In fact that’s what I have already done in the first part of this sermon – my advice to find joy, connection, gratitude, abundance and life. Focus on God who loves you. But the truth is God has high expectations for us as well as bringing comfort. We are meant to follow Jesus. We are meant to work for justice, be the image of God reflecting God’s love in the world. There is always more to do, more love to give, more people to help, more light to shine. The challenge is part of every call of God. Be the best God has created you to be.

So here I come to the conflict. Which I hate. The question is how is God challenging us in the week ahead? How might we serve Christ more faithfully in whatever circumstance we find ourselves this week?

There are a lot of songs, and prayers and poems about praising God in difficult experiences. “I praise you in the storm,” “It is well with my soul,” “Jesus Take the Wheel.” There is a lot of good advice about how to get through difficult times by dwelling in God’s love. But only experiencing that love, wallowing in that love, feeling God’s love – only dwelling in that love can really carry you through. Living inside God. You can’t explain it. You can’t understand it. You can’t make it happen. But you can receive God’s gift and live in that love. Be loved.

The reading from Ephesians talks about the power of God’s love. The power that raised Jesus from the dead. The power to move mountains. The power to change worlds. We are reminded that through the Holy Spirit, we have been given that same power of God’s love. You have within you the power to change the world. We have been given the power by God to bring life. To bring hope, joy, peace, light, love. We don’t always embrace that greatness. But scripture tells us we are called to live into that power and to share God’s love in the world.

What will that look like for you this week? How will you show love? How will you shine light? I realize that is an enormous challenge – living God’s grace in the world. So just carve off one little piece. Do one thing to extend God’s love in the world. And if you do. And if we all do. That is a hundred acts of love powered by God’s Holy Spirit in the world. Shine the light. What if we all do just two things this week to share love? Joy, connection, gratitude, abundance, life.

I will let you keep pondering God’s call to you, God’s challenge for you, God’s will for you this week. Listen for God’s voice. And as Ephesians says - May God’s Spirit give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know Jesus, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which Christ has called you. This week, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. This is the will of God in Christ Jesus working in me and you. Thanks be to God.

November 19, 2023

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Serve the Lord with gladness;

 come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

 It is he who made us, and we are his;

 we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving

 and his courts with praise.

 Give thanks to him; bless his name.

For the Lord is good;

 his steadfast love endures forever

 and his faithfulness to all generations.

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances,

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.