

Third Sunday of Advent - Year B – 12/17/17

My dear people of God:

When I was a young man, someone told me,

*“Treat each person you meet
as if he recently had his heart broken,
and you will probably be right.”*

Those words stuck with me, although I have not always put them into practice. I can excuse myself by saying I was distracted or irritated or just plain weary. Or perhaps I was too preoccupied with my own hurts to see theirs. We all need someone to help put our hearts back together - and we have a hard time finding such a healer.

Today, Isaiah foretells one *“anointed,”* that is, designated, “to heal the brokenhearted.” Many people thought John was that man. But he makes it clear he is not the Christ (which in Greek means “anointed”). John came to make a straight path for the One who was to come.

My dear people of God: Last week we meditated upon the importance of acknowledging one’s sins. And we saw how John required confession in order to receive baptism from him. John is the greatest of all prophets because he identified our wound – not just as something inflicted on us, but as something self-inflicted most of the time. Nevertheless, it would not do much good to recognize the cause of our misery unless there existed healing, to admit our failures unless there existed forgiveness.

John (as great as he was), proclaimed that SOMEONE much greater than he was, was coming. John had the diagnosis, but this ONE possessed the cure. HE, JESUS is the cure. HE brings forgiveness and healing. Because of HIM, Paul can say those incredible words, “Rejoice always” (1Thessalonians 5:16).

Those words do not come easy to my lips. Early this week, a bomb exploded at the narrow passage (pedestrian tunnel) near Port Authority in Manhattan done by a Bangladeshi national named Akayed Ullah. Ullah himself and five others were injured. People are scared. To such people, the words *“Rejoice always”* would sound like mockery. Nor can I say them to people who share

with me their hidden sufferings. But, Saint Paul, writing to people who suffered as much or more than we do, says "Rejoice always."

What I dare not express verbally, I will at least try to do with a symbol. This Sunday we light the third candle of our Advent wreath. Its color is rose. It signifies rejoicing. We come to the Lord with hearts broken (in some degree by our own faults), but we look toward the ONE who, HIMSELF, brings forgiveness and healing.

Today, Third Sunday of Advent - also known as Gaudete Sunday, we choose to rejoice. Gaudete is a Latin word meaning "rejoice." A priest once told this story: A famous preacher was trying to teach his students to make their facial expressions harmonize with what they are speaking about. *"When you speak of heaven," he said, "let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of Hell – well, then, your ordinary face will do."*

I remember a priest who visited a wealthy member of his parish. The man had a lovely home with a landscaped yard. The priest commented on how beautiful it all was, and how happy his parishioner must be. *"Yes,"* said the man, but with a sad face he added, *"but look at those bushes. I pay good money to have them tended and that's what I get!"* Cynicism is the default position. On the other hand, joy can surprise us.

The same priest who visited that wealthy parishioner had his Spanish Immersion Program in a Central American country. While visiting a rural community, a man asked the priest to come to his home. It was a humble hut, but with a broad smile the man said, *"Father, we have saved for a year to get this tin (galvanized iron sheet) roof. Will you bless it for us?"*

Joy surprises us. It shows up in unexpected places. It goes against the tide. Joy involves our whole being - which includes our ability to choose. St. Paul says, "Rejoice always!" It's not a suggestion, like *"cheer up,"* or *"look on the sunny side."* It is, rather, a command, "Rejoice". Not only when things are going well. Not just when I am getting my way - but always. "Rejoice always." St. Paul can command joy because joy requires a conscious choice. Joy is a decision. St. Paul tells us we will find joy by praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstance and refraining from every kind of evil.

St. Paul does not tell us to wait until we have all our ducks in a row. He says, "Rejoice always." Fortunately, St. Paul explains how to do it:

(1)The first thing he says is to pray. When things go wrong, I tend to throw up my arms and get discouraged. Paul says, "*Pray without ceasing.*" Even when things fall apart - or especially when they fall apart. So pray without ceasing.

(2)The second step to joy is gratitude. Paul says, "*in all circumstances give thanks.*" Did St. Paul give thanks when his own people insulted him and physically attacked him? Did he give thanks when his boat capsized and he found himself drifting on a cold sea? Maybe not immediately, but by prayer he saw God's hand at work and he gave thanks.

(3)Paul then adds something that seems obvious: "*Refrain from every kind of evil.*" If we are involved in a sinful activity, we will not be happy. We will not be able to rejoice. For that reason we need to hear John the Baptist: "*Make straight the way of the Lord.*"

This Advent let us make a thorough examination of conscience – a complete inventory of our lives. Why do you think pencils have erasers? Let us go to confession. Confession can lighten our conscience. A clear conscience leads to joy.

I hope I have a smile to match the theme of this Sunday's readings. Isaiah says: *I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my God is the joy of my soul.*

When things do not go well, we must draw upon unexpected inner resources. It is not resignation or cynicism. It is a kind of humility like we see in today's Gospel where John could say plainly, "*I am not the Christ.*" I am not able to save you or even myself, but there is Someone who can. For Him we wait in joyful hope.

The great French novelist, Leon Bloy, said, "*Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.*" The joy in question is not necessarily a bubbly feeling. In the ancient world, they understood happiness differently than we do today. For Aristotle happiness referred not so much to a passing emotion as to a whole quality of life: being in a right relationship with other human beings, with the world and ultimately with God.

The German poet, Friedrich Schiller wrote a poem, "*An die Freude*" (Ode to Joy) in 1785 to express "happiness". Ludwig van Beethoven provided music

in 1824 to the poem in his ninth symphony. “*An die Freude*” expresses this view of happiness so emphatically that it even says that “even a worm has contentment.” That is, the lowly worm is in correct relationship with its world. For the worm it comes naturally; for us, we need to work at it and hope to receive help from above. But we can find the happiness which St. Paul speaks of when he commands us, “Rejoice always.” John the Baptist tells us to take life seriously - in light of eternity. And St. Paul tells us not to take seriously the disappointments of life. Instead, he wants us to "rejoice always." We Christians can rejoice even when things go bad because we see the true point of human existence.

We are here to make a choice where we are going to spend eternity. We want to join the saints with God in heaven, and not to separate ourselves eternally from God. John the Baptist confronts us with this choice. He gets in our face. You and I have to choose where we will spend eternity. This life is serious because how we live it determines where we will spend eternity.

May the Good Lord shower us with His choicest blessing. Amen.