

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Rejoice, Pray, and Give Thanks

Scripture Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 NRSV

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

This past Friday, the Clear Lake church had a cookie sale and baked potato supper, sharing a joy with neighbors in this difficult time. Everyone wanted and liked the cookies so when I tried to buy cookies, they had already sold out. But, I was able to experience the baked potato that UMW prepared with sincerity. By the way, did you know that I have been looking forward to eating the potato dish since I was in California?

After it was decided that I would be sent to Willow River Parish, as all Methodist pastors do, I wanted to know what the churches look like and where they are located. I was very curious about the congregations I would meet. So, I searched each church on Google Maps. When I searched Clear Lake United Methodist Church, I could see the pictures and locations of the church buildings and read reviews of the church. Usually, when searching for churches on a map, the reviews they have are common, such as “Good Church,” “Good Fellowship,” or “Good service.” However, Clear Lake’s review was more special. It was “Went for baked potato dinner, good potato!” While reading the review, I got to know that Clear Lake Church is famous for potato dishes, and I have been looking forward to tasting them since then, but I finally

experienced it and it was amazing! When I had it, my heart was filled with joy and gratitude.

According to the second scripture reading, Paul suggests to the congregation of Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all circumstances. (16-18) It was around 50 A.D. when the letter was written. Most scholars say that the letter to the Thessalonians is the first of Paul's letters. Early Christians were persecuted by the world, unlike today. The letter to the Thessalonians tells about Paul's comfort for the early Christians and what it is to live by keeping faith to live in the difficult time. Today our worship has a time of passing the peace of Christ. During that time, we greet each other warmly and ask after friends, family, and new church members. In the early church, Christians had time to ask each other how they were doing during the communion, which was very important to them. They were always threatened because of their faith, and there was no guarantee that they would meet someone next Sunday that they met at the church today. Therefore, they greeted each other, thanking God for His protection for a week. I hope in the name of the Lord that the Holy Spirit will touch your hearts and you will greet each other more actively during the passing of the Peace of Christ.

A few days ago, I was surprised to know that Christmas is less than two weeks away. At the end of the year, many people expect and plan for the new year, and reflect on the plans that they regretfully did not achieve during the year. Especially this year, I think it would have been difficult for us to achieve what we had planned at the end of last year or early this year because of the Covid-19 that we had never expected. To give hope to those who live in these unstable times, Paul wrote the letter to the Thessalonians. In 1:3-4 it says, "Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God,

that he has chosen you.” (NRSV) The work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope are traits Christians should possess.

As mentioned earlier, Paul suggests us to prepare for the second coming of Christ, saying “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” (16-18)

Paul tells us to rejoice always. We Christians were called to participate in joy. Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Anyone can be happy with good results. The joy that Paul says is a joy that is not shaken by the result. The lives of Christians change before and after experiencing the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Although things around us don't change, values of our lives are changed because of Jesus Christ. Our world view is totally changed because of Christ. After the Holy Spirit touches our heart, our lives are full of joy, and its source is Jesus Christ. It is good news that the world cannot give us that he has come to this world for us, that he has loved us, and that he has saved us from sin.

Paul tells us to pray without ceasing. When you hear this, some people might think, “So don't eat, don't meet friends, just pray?” Frankly speaking, our daily life is very busy to pray without ceasing. And if we don't do anything but pray, we can't maintain our lives and it's impossible to pray without ceasing. The meaning of Paul's recommendation to pray without ceasing is to live with a prayer. In Matthew 6:7-8, Jesus says, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles to; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (NRSV) As he told us, we should rely on God who knows everything, and follow his will.

Verbal communication is only part of how we communicate. When we communicate with others, we not only use voice, but also use body gestures and facial expressions. Therefore, prayer includes verbal and non-verbal. Listening to others and understanding others, and the attitude of life to follow God's will can be a prayer as well. This is

because the Holy Spirit touches our hearts, not the ears, and always knocks on the door of the soul. Prayer is the opening of our hearts to embrace the joy God is willing to share with us.

Paul says to give thanks in all circumstances. Giving thanks seems easy, but it's not something anyone can do. Conditions are necessary to give thanks. Giving thanks is something that only people who think they have received can do. God loves us so much so he sent us Jesus, the only son. And he did not refuse to die on the cross to save us from sin. And he overcame death and resurrected and ascended to heaven. The cross of Jesus Christ is proof that God loves us humans. We Christians who believe in Jesus Christ as our savior are those who have received the love and grace of God. We are those who know and believe that we have received the amazing love without cost. The lives of those who accept the truth are always full of gratitude. Thus, gratitude is inviting Christ into one's life. It is only possible with a heart of love.

Giving thanks makes us holy. Giving thanks is to keep all possibilities open to God. The reason we can give thanks in all circumstances is God's will beyond human judgment and experience. As we live our lives, we sometimes experience good things and sometimes sad things.

Romans 8:28 says that "...All things work together for good..." (NRSV) We Christians wait for God's plan and will, not our own plan and reality we encounter now. We believe in God who makes all things for good.

In the end of the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says that "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this." (24) Christians are those who know God called them, so we call this as calling or vocation. God, who called us, will achieve everything. I hope you believe that.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances" is God's will for you. These three are the heart and love of Christ who called you. May the Holy Spirit touch your hearts so you rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances in the peace of Christ. Amen.