

Rejoice Always! (1 Thessalonians 5:16-19)

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (July 9, 2023)

6 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.

I was so impressed last Sunday that many of you pronounced my name perfectly. My first name is Hyuk, and my last name is Seonwoo. Not always easy to pronounce, is it? But you did it very well.

In my family tradition for naming newborn babies, five fundamental elements of the earth – metal, water, wood, fire, and soil – have been circulated since ancient times. For example, my younger brother’s name and mine have ‘fire’ as a common denominator. My father’s siblings have ‘wood’ as a common element, while my two sons, born in the US, have ‘soil’ in their names. I am not sure this tradition will continue into future generations here in America. I still love to share that the essential elements in God’s creation have been circulated and passed down through generations over hundreds or thousands of years.

When I draw a picture of my life from birth to the present by analogy with the flow of a river, my river begins with a large boulder at the mouth of it. My parents experienced oppressive Japanese colonial rule and the Korean War when they were young. They told me that right before I was born with a C-section, the doctor said that the baby had already died. But he continued on, doing his best to save my mother. Thanks be to God! Both my mother and I were miraculously alive. I still have the marks on my head from that time. Can you see the boulder at the mouth of my river?

I was baptized when I was an infant. My mother told me I cried a lot, shaking my head. I believe that God was present in that baptism and God is still with me all the time. When I was around 5 or 6 years old, Korean writing characters on a picture frame in my house got my attention. I did not understand their meaning, but for many years I ate, played, and slept under the frame. One day I asked my mom what the word meant. She smiled and answered, “It is ‘Joy.’ [In Korean: 기쁨 “Kippum”]. My son, you are the joy of God. I hope you will always be happy with a joyful heart.” From time to time, I remember what she told me, and I am still grateful for that moment of my childhood.

Fast forwarding my river story, after being discharged from the Korean Air Force, which was my three years of mandatory military service, I studied at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Korea, the school founded by Henry G. Appenzeller, a pioneer Methodist missionary in Korea. It is not only my family influences and traditions, but I also feel that I am home in Methodist theology, practices, and its openness. I didn't intend to be a pastor though but was seeking for a more meaningful life.

Academically motivated, I eventually came to the USA to learn more from the authors of theology books that I read in Korean translation.

Studying in the US was not easy. More and more friends who studied with me in Korea and the US were becoming ordained clergy, but I was planning to conclude my long journey as a seminarian. Sometimes, God seemed absent or hidden. At other times, I felt I was one of those Jonahs who was fleeing from God's calling. I struggled with multiple challenges, seeking and longing for God. One day, I walked around Marsh Chapel, which is right beside the Boston University School of Theology, feeling lost and shattered.

Unexpectedly, I had an unforgettable Jesus experience. Jesus came into my whole self in an instant. I immediately knew it was Jesus. It was a spontaneous feeling of complete love and comfort. Like the Lego pieces fitting together in the blink of an eye, I felt the scattered fragments of my inner self becoming whole. Since then, along with more experiences of joys, smiles, tears, fogs and storms in my life, I found that it was God's call to ministry.

This unforgettable moment of integration eventually led me to begin the ordination process. And this became one of the most important memories in my river story. As Thomas Keating put it, I believe "God briefly lifted a corner of the veil, to the mystery that is actually going on all the time." And God has continued to accompany and guide me in my faith and ministry journey.

All of us have river stories. As Christians, especially through continual prayers, we are invited to notice and pay attention to how God shows up in our rivers. How God has shown up throughout our journey of life and still shows up in our present moments. It is an important part of our faith journey to reflect on 'How the Spirit

of God is at work, troubling, urging, awakening us to seek and notice God's ever-present in our daily, hourly, and every step.¹

The apostle Paul had his river story too. His river was full of dramatic curves. Paul was one of the key persecutors of Christians. When Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned to death, Paul was present and approved his killing. But when Paul met the risen Christ, when his river was connected to the river of Jesus Christ, Paul began to live as a disciple who testified about Jesus Christ everywhere, and eventually, he himself was martyred.

Whenever I read the Pauline Epistles, I am amazed that Paul was filled with the mood of rejoicing. Paul did not lose his heart of gratitude and praise towards God even when he was imprisoned or facing the threat of death. As an itinerant minister, Paul wrote letters to encourage the earliest Christians and newly converted siblings not to lose faith, love, and hope in the midst of congregational conflicts or adversaries of the time. Paul also invited his fellow believers, including you and me, to rejoice. Rejoice in spite of all the challenges because of God's unfailing love! Today's reading is one of the good examples, as Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians with well-known exhortations: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances."

1 Thessalonians, one of Paul's epistles, was actually the first Christian text of any we still know about, before even the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. In 1 Thessalonians, faith is presented as the right relationship with God. This faith leads Christians to love God and one another, including themselves. Paul concludes his letter with the exhortations mentioned earlier:

"Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances."

Let us call this invitation an "RPG" invitation:

R stands for "Rejoice always;"

P for "Pray without ceasing,"

G for "Give thanks in all circumstances."

Paul wanted to encourage the Thessalonian church members to practice his RPG invitation. I wonder how the Thessalonians responded to Paul's exhortations. When we hear "Always, without ceasing, in all circumstances," we often become

¹ Gateways to God.

overwhelmed. “Rejoice always?” “Rejoice when I am burdened or suffering?” And, “Pray without ceasing?” “Give thanks in all circumstances? Perhaps, we wish Paul would say “when we need to,” “occasionally,” “in some circumstances,” or “in special cases.” We feel that would be more realistic and acceptable.

Paul’s invitation is not easy to understand if we only give thanks for our successes, something we feel good about, or something we are satisfied with. Instead, Paul invites us to see God’s presence in every situation, whether good or challenging. When we notice and invite God’s presence all the time, our life becomes increasingly prayerful, joyful and grateful. When God is with us, we don’t have to carry the burdens of grief, pain, and other concerns alone. Indeed, that is exactly what we can *always* be thankful for: God is *always* with us.

Paul also invites us not to rely on our own will only when we want to rejoice, pray, and give thanks all the time. They are the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and we genuinely need them. Paul is clear that we cannot experience authentic gratitude and joy without opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit. Noticing and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us. Do you see why Paul urged Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit? Paul still urges us to journey together without losing the power and the ever presence of the Holy Spirit.

God’s beloved siblings, I am so grateful and honored to serve you, the Body of Christ called the Swift Memorial United Methodist Church. I invite you to remember that we are called to joyfully praise and give thanks to God in every corner of our lives. For this summer, starting next Sunday, I plan to preach on the theme of how to live a joyful and happy life in God's love and grace, focusing on the beatitude Jesus taught.

Before I conclude this sermon, I invite you to rub your hands. Now extend your hands towards one another. And follow me, smiling at each other: “You are the joy of God. Be happy with a joyful heart in God. God bless you!” (You can put your hands down.)

Because of God the Almighty, God the Great Caregiver, we have reasons to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.” And all God’s people say, “Amen!”