



SERMONS THAT WORK

Advent 3 (C)

God's Joy Is Justice

[RCL] Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word meaning “rejoice,” and the origin of this name for the third Sunday of Advent comes from the beginning of our reading from Philippians today: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Advent is actually a penitential season like Lent, something many people don't realize. Just like how in Lent we use the time to prepare for Easter and reflect on things like our mortality and sin, we do the same in Advent to prepare for Christmas. Thinking about how much we need Jesus helps us get ready to welcome and greet him. It makes the contrast between the penitential season and the major feast leading to a festal season all the greater, and our joy at Christmas and Easter all the brighter. That's why we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath on the third Sunday of Advent. Pink says joy and celebration!

So now that you have perhaps a bit of new liturgical knowledge to pull out at cocktail parties, let's take this concept of Gaudete Sunday to our scriptures. The theme is readily apparent not only in the text for which the Sunday is named, the Philippians “rejoice” text, but also in Zephaniah, which begins, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” In our canticle from Isaiah, we say, “Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation,” and “Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy.” So far, so good. We have got this rejoicing thing down. It is all about Gaudete around here.

Until we get to our Gospel, where John the Baptist commits a major party foul: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” John! Don't be such a downer! No wonder no one invites you to parties. Your living in the wilderness by yourself is starting to make more and more sense.

So, at first glance, it's hard to understand why this is our gospel for Gaudete Sunday. But let's look at it another way. Who else might want to celebrate Gaudete Sunday besides us? How about God? Maybe God would like the chance to be joyful once in a while. If we take that as a possibility, we have to ask ourselves: what makes God joyful?

And there is where our text from Luke starts to make sense. In this gospel, John the Baptist is functioning as a sort of ethical consultant. People are coming to him and asking him for advice on how they should live their lives. The crowds ask him what they should do, and he says that if they have two coats, they should give one away to someone who needs it. Tax collectors, notorious as a group for being unscrupulous and exploiting the people they collected from, ask him what to do, and he tells them to collect only what is owed and no more.

Even Roman soldiers go to John for advice. That is a remarkable thought, that members of the occupying army are seeking out this fringe Judean prophet on the very margins of society and religious acceptability, and asking him for direction in their lives. And John provides it, freely and very specifically. He tells them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

So, what can we learn from John's words? What principle is John demonstrating to these seekers that they must embody if they are to do God's will? Justice. John's words are all about justice. They are all tailored specifically to the situation of the people asking for guidance. John doesn't issue vague, general pronouncements like, "Try to be a decent person," and "Don't be awful to other people." He speaks right into the lives and contexts and specific circumstances of these people and tells them how to live ethically. John tells them how to do justice right where they are, now, in their own lives.

Often, we think justice is something huge and sweeping, accomplished only with massive movements of people and charismatic leaders and negotiations between heads of state. Justice does often require forces that big to move us past our prejudices and habits of oppression. But justice starts very small, one act at a time, just as John the Baptist is preaching. How do you treat your waiter? How do you treat your boss? How do you treat the cashier at the grocery store? How you treat these people is how you treat Jesus.

People tend to get antsy when "God" and "justice" come into the same conversation. We think of justice as the opposite of mercy, and as full of wrath and condemnation of us and our sin. John the Baptist is certainly not helping our discomfort with his preaching this morning. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." That sounds kind of scary, doesn't it?

But we've already learned that justice and joy are partners in God's kingdom. God is not out to get us. God is not waiting for us to trip up on some silly sin and then cackling with glee and hanging us over an abyss. God's will is our growing up into the full stature of Christ, becoming capable of partnering with God in bringing God's justice to fruition on the earth. So how does God do that?

Well, consider John's words about Jesus: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." We often think of the wheat and the chaff as two different groups of

people. The wheat are the virtuous people we wish we could emulate, and the chaff are the poor clueless sinners that we're all too certain we're lumped in with. It's not a very hopeful message.

But what if they're not two different groups of people? What if we're all the wheat *and* the chaff? We're all wheat, brought in as part of God's harvest, and Jesus in his love for us will cleanse and purify us with his holy fire and burn away those useless things that hold us down and hold us back from fulfilling God's will. It may not be particularly comfortable, but it will be liberating. That puts rather a more hopeful spin on it, doesn't it? We're all a little chaffy, but there is good wheat underneath those obscuring, besetting sins, and Jesus' love can burn away all the obstacles that prevent us from following him faithfully.

This is news worth celebrating on Gaudete Sunday. This is news worth rejoicing over. This is the knowledge and the truth that we have the ability to make God rejoice every time we act for justice—every time we repent of racism, every time we stand in solidarity with the oppressed, every time we refuse to doggedly hang on to our own ill-gotten power. And, as John the Baptist tells us, these grand ideas are brought to life one interaction at a time, one conversation at a time, one relationship at a time. We might wonder if we have what it takes to live out God's justice in the world. Well, Jesus comes to us and burns our chaff away so that our wheat might be gathered into the granary, to be used to make the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.

So, the next time you set aside your own preferences and your own self-interest and act with justice and kindness, remember that you are making God joyful. No matter how small the action you are offering of your heart, you are saying to God, "Gaudete! Rejoice!" And God hears you.

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