



HOLY LIVING IN HARD TIMES
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

It truly has been an extremely challenging year in the United States of America and the world at large – with the economic earthquake and the collapse that has shaken our planet:

- Unemployment is nearing the 7% mark here in America.
- The war in Iraq rages on.
- The recent terrorist attacks in India.
- The cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe.
- The auto industry crisis.
- The divorce rate at 50%.
- Federal deficit at an all-time high.
- The Casey Anthony trial in Florida.
- The mortgage meltdown.
- The Penn State football game with Iowa. Enough said.

We begin to understand the man who said, “I used to be an incurable optimist, but this year I am cured.”

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent. A few moments ago we lit the rose candle of our Advent wreath. This candle is known as the Gaudete Candle – which means ‘rejoice.’ This is why Doug and I selected as our first hymn, “**How Great Our Joy.**” However many of you might be saying ‘Yeah, right – joy. What do we have to be joyful about?’ How can we be a holy people in such hard times?

The Apostle Paul opens our lesson by declaring, “Be joyful always, Pray continually, Give thanks in all circumstances.”

The words “**rejoice always**” – are not an empty spiritual cliché shared by Paul to rally the flock.¹ Yes, giving thanks in all circumstances may have struck the ears of the Thessalonians as odd advice (as it did to many of you today) – considering all the afflictions they had endured.²

However, these words have power and integrity because the Apostle Paul has already put into practice what he is asking the church folk there to do. We know from our studies this year in the book of Acts that the Apostle Paul founded the church at Thessalonica. The thanks he receives for such faith is that he is run out of town. His life is threatened. The enemy at Thessalonica chases him all the way to Berea – still seeking to kill him. Before this – he was almost stoned to death at Lystra.

He then worked hard at the Jerusalem Conference to keep unity in the Christian movement. He has a bitter disagreement with John Mark and Barnabas – and they go separate ways. He is beaten and jailed at Philippi. However, in the darkest of life’s greatest difficulties he kept his mind and spirit focused on the ministry and mission that Christ has called him to. So Paul knows quite well of what he speaks and writes.

You and I can rejoice – even when times are not pleasant – because we belong to Christ who will come again. This promise empowers us to live whole-heartedly between the great fact of Christ’s coming – and the sure expectation of his coming again. The words “Be alive” sum up Paul’s counsel to them and us.³

I shared with you once before the story of the great inventor Thomas Edison from my home state of New Jersey. One winter night his workshop with all his notes and projects in it burned to the ground. As they surveyed the ruins the next day, they found a single piece of paper – singed with black lines around the edges – but still readable. He then realizes “the fire could destroy the exterior – but not his interior – his passion – his will.” He said to his son, “There can be something good about a fire. It destroyed all my mistakes and failures – and will force me to start over with new plans.” A short time later Edison had his first great invention come to fruition. This is what the Apostle Paul was getting at in sharing “Give thanks in all circumstances.” Now, I don’t believe God causes all things to happen – but in everything that does happen – God does have a will and way for us to respond. God is always at work. God is active and moving in the mess of our human lives. So to save us “from weak resignation to the evils⁴ we deplore – as Dr. Fosdick’s hymn exhorted us last week – we “pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances and rejoice.” We live to work and fight the good fight for another day.

We know from the cross that there is no circumstance that is beyond God’s sovereign action to reverse and use for our salvation and spiritual maturity.

It was in seminary that I was exposed to the writings of Brother Lawrence and his short spiritual classic **PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF GOD**. Brother Lawrence lived out the spiritual truths and insights from our epistle lesson today – as well as anyone I know of in the Christian faith.

Brother Lawrence was born Nicholas Herman around 1610 in the region of Lorraine in eastern France. His birth records were destroyed in a fire at his parish church during the Thirty Years War – a war in which he fought as a young soldier.⁵

As a young man – Herman's poverty forced him into joining the army. In army life he at least had food to eat and received a small stipend.⁶

During his time in the army – he had a revelation that set him on a unique spiritual journey. In the deep of winter (much like we are in now) Herman looked at a barren tree – stripped of leaves and fruit – waiting silently and patiently for the sure hope of summer. Gazing at the tree – Herman grasped for the first time the extravagance of God's grace – and the unfailing sovereignty of divine providence. Like the tree – he himself was spiritually dead. However, he realized that God had life waiting for him – a new season of life could be his. At that moment he said that lifeless tree, "first flashed in upon my soul the fact of God and a love for God that never after ceased to burn."⁷

An injury that left him slightly paralyzed the rest of his life forced his retirement from the army. He spent some time in private service as a footman. However, because of his injury he said, "I was a footman who was clumsy and broke everything."⁸

Because of his conversion and spiritual experience he entered a newly formed monastic community in Paris. Not having the religious education to become a cleric he entered as a 'lay brother' – taking the name "Lawrence of the Resurrection." In times as trouble as today, Brother Lawrence cultivated and followed a pure and simple way to walk continually in God's presence.⁹ Because he had little training or skills besides soldiering – Lawrence was assigned to the grounds crew or gardening. He was an absolute failure and disaster in the garden. Because of his injury he stomped on the plants – and had absolutely no success as a green thumb. He destroyed every plant he touched (sounds like somebody I know.).

The superiors of the order then assigned him to the kitchen. He tried his hand at cooking – but often he failed to skin the rabbits before putting them in the pot for stew. So they gave him the task of scrubbing and washing the pots and pans. This he did with great joy and devotion. It was said of his work "that the Lord walks among the pots and pans."¹⁰ It was said, that he made the kitchen his sanctuary and worship center. He discovered how God could work in the experience of everyday life. I think of Eileen Voran and Denise Strick who prepare the meals on Wednesday nights for the youth ministry team outreach to the youth of our neighborhood. I think of the casserole ministry and the fellowship luncheons.

However, the one spiritual gift that Brother Lawrence had was the closeness (the intimacy) of his relationship to God. He knew that the holiness of God was to invade and penetrate every nook and cranny of his everyday life. I smiled and laughed to myself when I read that every time Brother Lawrence made a mistake in the kitchen he

would pray, “Lord, what a mess I make when you leave me to myself.” I say a soft “amen” to that. If we would only do that today.

It seems that serving and practicing the presence of God with his hands in the dishwater – many fellow pilgrims in the order were drawn to him. Because of his profound peace with the Lord many came to him for spiritual guidance and direction. The wisdom he passed on in both personal conversation and written letters, formed the nucleus for the small book written after his death. He never knew or sought fame or notoriety during his time at the monastery. That would come later. Because of his spiritual discipline of practicing the presence of God – he moved from being the ‘nerd’ of the order – to its noble Abbott in his later days.

It seems that this little spiritual classic written by Brother Lawrence continues to have a profound and larger-than-life influence even to this very moment.

John Wesley, our spiritual mentor, was deeply influence and moved by his insights.

A.W. Tozer, one of the great pastors in the evangelical tradition writes:

“One of the purest souls ever to live on this fallen planet was Nicholas Herman, known as Brother Lawrence. He wrote very little, but what he wrote has seemed to several generations of Christians to be so rare and so beautiful as to deserve a place near the top among the world’s great books of devotion. The writings of Brother Lawrence are the ultimate in simplicity; ideas woven like costly threads to make a pattern of great beauty.”¹¹

I was further surprised in my research that Rick Warren of Saddleback Church is a great proponent of Brother Lawrence’s spiritual insights. He has developed a whole network to share his insight with fellow pastors. Rick Warren recently shared in a sermon to his 22,000 parishioners “to develop the habit of praying silent – breathless prayers for those you encounter.”

Dr. Calvin Miller selected Brother Lawrence as one of the 10 saints who have provided bread and counsel and spiritual direction for the journey of life for him and countless others.¹² Yes, the purpose of God for our lives has to do with fellowship and servanthood – not entertainment. This is the only basis that we may find this fellowship with God – and that is with godliness.¹³

So, the words of the Apostle Paul are as precious – and up-to-date as when the Holy Spirit inspired him to write them almost 2,000 years ago. They continue to travel through the corridors of time – impacting greatly anyone who will read and apply them.

Perhaps, like Brother Lawrence – spiritually you feel as dead as the leafless tree he observed. Remember, a new life – a new season – will come if only you seek it.

Perhaps – like Brother Lawrence you think you serve in a place of obscurity. However, if he could turn his kitchen and kitchen sink into a sanctuary – so can you. Think of what you could do in your office – classroom – factory – assembly line – your station – or place of duty.

If Brother Lawrence became a saint washing dishes, scrubbing pots, running errands, and fixing sandals – imagine what God could do with your place of service if you only practiced the presence of God.

The Bible is the story of our God – working through anybody who would treasure his presence.¹⁴ The Bible is the record of those nobodies like Moses, Gideon, and David who practiced the presence of God. Today we know their names – and the God they served – and not the Pharaohs and emperors and Goliaths they fought against.

So, Advent is the time to reorganize your life to be sure we are ‘Practicing the Presence of God.’ It won’t be easy. It will require discipline and submission to the authority of God’s word.

This is our mission to the world which God loved so much – to bring his transforming power of live to a world darkened by sin, death, and evil. We are his instruments to bring his holiness into hard places. God is still at work! And as **verse 24** reminds us – the One who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
December 14, 2008
All Rights Reserved – Copyrighted 12/14/08

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred B. Craddock, [et.al.], **“Preaching Through the Christian Year, YEAR B,”** Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, 1993, first edition, page 18.

² Ibid, page 18.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator,** NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1863.

⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick, **“God of Grace and God of Glory,”** verse 4.

⁵ www.practicegodspresence.com/BrotherLawrence, accessed 12/8/08.

⁶ www.ccel.org/L/Lawrence, accessed 12/8/08.

⁷ Ibid, ccel.org.

⁸ Op.cit, www.practicegodspresence.com.

⁹ Ibid, Presence of God.

¹⁰ www.practicegodspresence.com/reflections/otherwords, attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, accessed 12/08/08.

¹¹ Op.cit, practiceofgodspresence.com/reflections.

¹² Calvin Miller, **WALKING WITH THE SAINTS**, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1995, page xi.

¹³ Ibid, Miller, page 49.

¹⁴ Ibid, Miller, pages 50-51.