

This morning, we are celebrating Advent III. Our second reading today is a scripture that is a fixture in worship. The scripture for today is not only in our lectionary for the Advent season but we see it on Thanksgiving Day and then the scripture is also very popular at both weddings and funerals and while that may seem like a paradox; it is very appropriate.

We are able to experience the “rejoice in the Lord” today because on this Third Sunday of Advent, we rejoice as Christ ‘s birth draws nearer.

Last week, I preached a very emotional sermon and part of my sermon touched on this passage today; not realizing that I would be residing in chapter four today.

Our reading, chapter four, verses four through seven is the middle portion of a three-part exhortation. The first part of the exhortation is in verses two and three and in those verses, Paul encourages two prominent leaders in the community to put aside their differences and to “*be of the same mind in the Lord.*” The third part of the exhortation is in verses eight and nine where Paul urges his friends to concentrate their attention and lives on the virtues that they should be living into.

The second exhortation is today’s verses of four through seven. In this exhortation, he exhorts them to rejoice. I believe that last week, I shared pretty thoroughly on the subject, so I was looking at a few different angles. I was not fully sure which direction that I wanted to go.

I think that my sermon-writing location helped develop some of my direction. When you sit in the hallway that connects the parking garage and the hospital and have first-hand experience of the interaction of hundreds of individuals trying to see their loved ones and must go through the security team; your eyes are opened.

The word that came to my mind that was connected to this text is gentleness. Gentleness being displayed through individuals hoping to see their loved ones and the workers could be noticed. When gentleness was present, the conversations were vastly different.

Paul speaks about gentleness. His words are the following: “*Let your gentleness be known to everyone.*” The Greek word can have a few different translations. Morna Hooker who is a British Theologian and a New Testament scholar shares the she believes word choice should denote the following: “*generosity towards others that is a characteristic of Christ himself.*”

When we take a look at the context, Paul was wanting the community to participate in three aspects of gentleness. He wanted them to:

- 1) Welcome Others
- 2) Be Prepared to Forgive One Another
- 3) To Bear with One Another During the Trials of Life

I think our world and our church communities would be a pretty sweet place if we could live out this type of generosity. Can we think of ways, that we as members of Bay View can implement these three components in our daily lives?

I hope that you do not mind, but I am going to take a step back and look at chapter four in more of its entirety then just what we read today. In a sense, I have already done this by sharing that our reading is the middle section of three-part exhortation. But there is a thought that I came across in my studies and I wanted to share them with you.

Paul starts out chapter four with these words:

Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, whom I long to see, my joy and crown, **stand firm** in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Stand firm are the two words that stood out and Edward Pillar's commentary spoke to me. If you search for Edward, you will see that he is from the United Kingdom. He gained his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies through University of Wales in 2012.

As a reminder, in the first exhortation, Paul encourages two prominent leaders in the community to put aside their differences and to "be of the same mind in the Lord." Right before the exhortation, he tells them to stand firm.

Paul believes that these two prominent believers were about to walk away from their faith. The leaders were stepping back from their leadership responsibilities and the challenges of discipleship. Paul wanted them to lean into his three P's: perspective, purpose and pressing on.

But what does that mean?

Especially, how does that play out for those of us who are contemplating about stepping away. There is no doubt about it, there are many people who are struggling with discipleship. I understand that and Paul definitely understood that. Remember, Paul is in Prison. The letter runner almost died and the church community was scared and they were thinking this is too much of a commitment. Loving regardless of the cost can be dangerous.

So, today, I want to share with you the words and the answers from Edward. He gives five areas to focus in on. So, today, if you are wrestling with your discipleship and commitment; maybe these will help.

1) Hold on to the Joy to be found in God

Paul encouraged them strongly to rejoice in the Lord and the encouragement extends to us today. This does not mean that when we are going through a rough patch that we grit our teeth and rejoice. We are to fix our thoughts on Jesus and rejoice in the goodness that is found in God. As many of you know firsthand, the road that we travel can be very difficult and even distressing. However, we can look at God and rejoice. God's faithfulness never fails.

2) Hold on to the character of Christ

This is so much easier said than done, right? We are called to adopt the character of Christ each and every day. When life is running smoothly; it might be a little easier. But when life is difficult; this is hard to follow. This is where the gentleness plays in. To live into gentleness is a stark contrast to the cruel values that are the norm of our culture. The character of Christ is our perfect example of living into gentleness. Here is the tough concept for many to grasp: the gentleness of Christ stirred up hatred and violence. Thus, when you shower others with gentleness, be prepared that there may not be complete openness nor a welcoming spirit to your act of gentleness.

3) Hold on to the nearness of God

Friends, we need to hear this good news and it should be shouted from the mountain tops; especially during the Season of Advent. God is near. God is NOT a distant and aloof deity. The Lord is Near. Do you hear those words? These words should be a source of comfort and

consolation; especially to those who have contemplated or have stepped out of the journey of discipleship.

4) Pray with Thankfulness

You would think that prayer should almost come automatically, but it does not. When the going gets tough, prayer is often overlooked. If you are struggling with prayer, maybe these words and thoughts can help.

- a) Include **everything** in your prayers. Don't leave anything out, especially when the world seems to be crashing around you.
- b) **Don't worry**. That's almost laughable; right? We worry about everything in our society.
- c) **Give thanks**. The giving thanks is thanking God for a listening ear and for their presence in the midst of our struggles.
- d) make your request **known**. Throughout scriptures, we see individuals crying out to God and allowing God know of their concerns and needs. If you have requests, make them known. God will hear our concerns and will respond with love, mercy, and salvation.

5) God's Peace will be our Guard.

I know that I have tried to lean into these hard the last twelve days. Paul is clear in his teachings. If we hold on and pray; the peace of God will guard and keep our hearts and minds safe and that, to me, is such a relief.

Hopefully, these thoughts from Mr. Pillar can help you. As I close this sermon up, I want to go back to where I began. Gentleness. At all times, but especially during this time of the year, I want to encourage you to keep your commitment to gentleness. Even when you are vulnerable. When we hold onto this commitment, I believe that we will be living out our affirmation of baptism that we cling to when we commit to serve all people following the example of Jesus.

Amen.