

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Third Sunday of Advent - GAUDETE SUNDAY December 13, 2009 C

♪ GAUDETE SUNDAY ♪

REFLECTIONS ON WHAT HELPS AND HINDERS US FROM LIVING LIFE JOYFULL

The third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for "let us rejoice." Today's first and second readings have a clear spirit of joy in them. In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah tells the downcast Israelites to "*shout for joy*" and "*be glad and exult with all your heart.*" Why? Because the Lord God is in their midst and will help them overcome present difficulties. In the second reading, Paul is writing from prison to a community also experiencing difficulties. Yet Paul exhorts the Philippians to "*rejoice in the Lord always.*"

Despite these exhortations, all too many people do not experience joy. I read somewhere that one of the purposes of purgatory is to prepare us to *enjoy* heaven. Most of us seem to have a limited capacity for joy. So when we die, we need to be cleansed of whatever hinders us from attaining the everlasting joy of heaven.

The mystic Julian of Norwich once wrote: "*The greatest joy we can give Almighty God is to live life joyfully.*" The late Fr. Bernard Haring wrote: "*The spirit of joy is an infallible sign that one is a Christian.*" The worst advertisement for Christianity is a gloomy, pessimistic face. The philosopher, Nietzsche, once said: "*If you Christians want me to believe in your redeemer, you will have to look more redeemed.*" Someone else has said: "*If you are happy, you ought to notify your face.*"

As Christians, our joy is not rooted in our money or possessions, or the great family we have, or the job we may love. After all, as the book of Job affirms, any or all of these could be taken away in the twinkling of an eye. So when our joy is dependent on things *outside* of us, it rests on shaky ground.

As followers of Christ, our joy must be rooted in the belief and, hopefully, in the *felt experience* that God loves us unconditionally, and that Christ through his resurrection has defeated suffering, evil and death. (I say "hopefully, the felt experience of God" but this may not be present. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta had no such experience for 40 years. Yet she believed in the darkness of faith that God loved her.) We will experience suffering, evil and death in this life but these do not have the last word. In the end, if we are connected to Christ, we will defeat all the enemies of life and enter into the joy of the Lord.

Joy killers

What steals our joy? This is a great question and one worth reflecting on. The following are some possible joy killers.

- *Self-pity.* If we indulge a lot in "poor me parties," we will not be joyful.
- *Envy.* If we are always looking over our shoulders to see what others have, we will not be joyful.
- *Negative attitude.* If we have a tendency to always look at the glass as half empty, we will not be joyful.
- *Cynicism.* It has been said that one of the temptations of aging is cynicism. Why is this? Perhaps because many of our dreams have not materialized, especially dreams for material and relational success.
- *Unforgiving heart.* If we *deliberately* carry vengeful thoughts and refuse to even pray for the grace to let go of life's hurts, we will never be happy. What else steals your joy?

What facilitates joyful living?

It has been said that joy is a by-product of something. So what facilitates joyful living?

- *Believing in the depths of our heart that God loves us unconditionally.* We may believe this foundational truth in our heads but if we don't believe it in our *hearts*, Christian joy will elude us.
- *Acceptance of our reality can help us to live joyfully.* While we should try to change what *needs* to be changed and *can* be changed in our lives—be it work, relationships, health, faith, etc.—some things cannot be changed, e.g., certain physical conditions, our past, our losses, the aging process, etc. Each day, we have the *choice* to accept our present reality or to constantly reject or deny it. For example, we can accept and live with the fact that our childhood was unhappy; that some people took advantage of us and betrayed us; that we had an accident that left us physically disabled, etc., or we can daily hate our reality. We do not have to love the painful things that happened to us, but we need to come to terms with them or we will never experience joy. Rather, we will forever be miserable.

In her book *The Strength Within*, Barbara Hanson talks about how she came to terms with a car accident that left her a paraplegic at the age of nineteen. It is a most inspiring story of how one person came to terms with an event that had long-term consequences. Again and again, Hanson says that while we may not have much control over the circumstances of our lives, we do have

control over our *attitude* toward those circumstances. It is our attitude that will make or break us. We often see two people with very similar set of circumstances, e.g., a particular illness, loss of a loved one, abuse in childhood. One is filled with bitterness and resentment over his/her adversity, but the other person has come to terms with his/her circumstances and is living life with a reasonable amount of joy and peace. So coming to terms with our past misfortunes—failures, hurts, accidents, bad experiences—will most certainly lead us to live life more joyfully, whereas failing to deal with them will, most certainly, hinder us from experiencing the joys of life.

The "acceptance attitude" also comes into play when we are dealing with other frustrations, e.g., the aging process, and our own and other people's limitations. Joy will always elude us if we are constantly trying to *control* and *change* others. Likewise, joy will be lacking if we are *perfectionists* and have little or no acceptance of our own limitations. Surely, we should change what we can and always try to improve our performance, but that goal must be balanced with a basic acceptance of what is imperfect today in ourselves, in others, and in our life situation.

- *Joyful living is facilitated when we accept the past as history, the future as mystery, and the present as a gift.* We can't change the past. All we can do is change our *attitude* toward the past. We can't control the future. Our best-made plans may blow up in pieces any moment. But we can place the future in God's hands, trusting all will be well. Preoccupation with the past or future hinders us from enjoying the gift that is today. So we must learn to let go of the past, trust the future, and live today as fully and joyfully as we can.
- *Taking time to go within to reflect and pray facilitates joyful living.* True happiness and joy are found within and not in other people and the external world. As the best selling author, Fr. John Powell, S.J., says, "*Happiness is an inside job.*" We do a certain violence to our soul when we fail to come aside from activity and noise in order to be present to the stirrings in our heart.
- *Taking time to count our blessings facilitates joyful living.*
- *Giving expression to what we feel passionate about promotes joyful living.* Each of us, whether we know it or not, has one or more passions in life (cooking, gardening, painting, fishing, woodworking, etc.). We need to honor our passions by giving them expression.

Reflection Question: What gives you joy? What attitudes foster joyful living and what attitudes steal your joy?

Practical advice from John the Baptist

It would be easy to imagine John the Baptist as a bit of a weirdo. He is out in the desert dressed in camel's hair; his diet is grasshoppers and wild honey; he is yelling at people to repent of their sins. Large crowds of people go out to the desert to listen to him, including tax collectors and soldiers. After listening to him and having been moved by his preaching, some people start to ask, "What must we do?" In today's gospel, we find John offering some very practical answers. He tells the people, "*If you have food and clothing, share it.*" In other words: don't be greedy. To a group of tax collectors, he exhorts, "*Be fair and just in your dealings with others. Don't cheat.*" To the soldiers, he says: "*Don't bully people or falsely accuse them.*" You can see John is not asking the impossible. His responses are very practical and doable. If John the Baptist were around today, how might he respond to some of our questions? The following are a few sample questions and answers offered by a writer whose name I have mislaid.

- **"I'm in college; what should I do?"** Have fun while you're young, but work hard at your study, too. Be loyal to your principles and don't be just one of the crowd. And whatever the difficulties, keep up a good relationship with your parents.
- **"I'm in business; what about me?"** Be responsible both to the job and to the people who work with you. Be fair both to your boss and to the clients. Let your job be a genuine service to others, not just a matter of profit and loss.
- **"I'm working at home; what does God want from me?"** Keep in mind that your work is worthwhile, even if it's not paid and pensionable. And do it cheerfully with love.
- **"I'm unemployed and very down; what do you say to me?"** Keep trying to find useful things to do. Be helpful when you can and to whomever you can. Try to look at the positive side of having so much free time and make the best you can of it.
- **"I'm a retired person; what about me?"** Enjoy your retirement. Relax but also use some of your time to pray more and to serve others in your community who are needy.
- **"I have some guilt about past sins."** Go talk to your priest and make a good confession.

Have a blessed week,

