

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
Dec. 13, 2020 Streaming Mass
Third Sunday of Advent Year B I Thes. 5:16-24

Today, in the liturgical or worship life of the church, is called Gaudete Sunday. That, in the Latin language, means the Sunday "to rejoice." So, we are told in today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, "Rejoice always." We are called, invited, commanded even to be joyful. It can be very difficult to be joyful in a world replete with so much disease, violence, war, terror, torture, killing. For some, how can one be joyful, having lost a loved one, a job, a relationship? But the very fact that we are told by St. Paul to rejoice, to be joyful, shows that joy is something different from an emotion. Emotions simply are what they are—our feelings of happiness or sadness. Those feelings can't be turned on or off like a faucet—at will. Feelings are simply here with us, in us--they are what they are.

Joy is something different. Joy doesn't depend on external conditions, or what is going on in our lives, whether things are going well or poorly for us. Joy is different from happiness and can exist even in the midst of profound sorrow. Joy is the experience of knowing that we are loved unconditionally by the One who is at the Center and is the Source of all creation, and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, even death—nothing can take that love away from us. Joy is not something that happens to us; joy is something that we choose.

So, joy is something that can be cultivated. It is the decision to nourish that connection, that connectedness with the deep—down reality we call God, in moments set aside in conscious awareness, in prayer, and in doing Godly things, doing loving things, doing good deeds of justice and mercy, refusing to nourish negative thoughts, letting go of past grudges and resentments. For God is found in those spaces between people, in those connections between people, when ego gives way to compassion, when fear gives way to trust. Our emotions can sweep over us; we can be at the mercy of our emotions; we can be the victims of our emotions. But because joy is essentially a decision—a decision to be aware of the One to Whom we are connected—joy can therefore be nourished, cultivated, even cherished, so that we begin to live our lives on a less superficial, on a deeper, level. In fact that is what these few weeks of Advent are all about—that amidst this holiday season, we can continue to be aware of the holiday of Christ's birth—aware of Him who gives us access to that life on a deeper level.

It has been said that joy is the sign of the Holy Spirit dwelling in one's heart, in

one's soul. It is like the flag flying over Buckingham Palace or the White House announcing its principle occupant is in residence. So, joy announces the presence of the Holy Spirit alive in our hearts, giving evidence of our connection with the very Ground of our Being, with the one whom we call Creator and Sustainer, the one whom we call God and Father; the connection with our fellow human beings on this planet, seeing them not just as rivals, but as potential brothers and sisters; the connection with the various parts of ourselves, so that we need not be alien to ourselves. We gather today, as we gather every Sunday, to remember the essential things of life, but especially this Sunday, when we are told to rejoice. Why? Because we know that we can be joyful when we are happy, and joyful even when we are sad; because our hope is in the One who reveals to us that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death; because we are connected in the depth of our souls to the God who loves us unconditionally. Let us pray that we can be open and receptive to that gift of the Holy Spirit.