

3rd Sunday of Advent CCc

One Sunday morning, the priest noticed little Johnny staring at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The plaque was covered with names, and small American flags were mounted on either side of it. The seven year-old had been staring at the plaque for quite some time, so the priest walked up to him and greeted him, "Good morning, Johnny." "Good morning, Father," replied the young man, still focused on the plaque. "Father, what is this?" little Johnny asked.

"Well, son, it's a memorial to all the men and women who have died in the service."

Prayerfully, they stood there together, staring at the large plaque. And then little Johnny curiously asked, "Which one, Father, the 5:30 or the 8:30 or 10:30 service?" It is good to hear and enjoy a little Johnny story, right? It lightens up our mood and situates us to our celebration today – the *Gaudete* Sunday, the Sunday of Joy. Our readings today are studded with invitation for joy. We heard in our first reading the Prophet Zephaniah proclaiming, "Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion; sing for joy, O Israel." He was telling the Israelites to sing for joy despite the difficult situation they were in that time. Even though they were under the Assyrian domination, he would like them to shout for joy not because things are wonderful or great for them but because God is in their midst. Zephaniah is telling them that their joy must come from knowing that God is in their midst. It comes from knowing that he is there to lift them up when they are down; that he is there to inspire them when they are frustrated; that he is there to lend a hand when they are in need. Zephaniah is telling us that God's presence in us, with us, and through us is the true source of happiness in our lives. Jesus, our Lord, is indeed the foundation of our joy!

And so like the crowd in the gospel, we also ask, "What should we do to have joy in our every day lives? St. John the Baptist answers this for us, "Share! If you have cloak, give it to the one who has none!" He is encouraging us here to start thinking less of ourselves. We have to know that having more things in life would not make us happy. They only satisfy us momentarily. It is building positive relationships that bring true joy in our lives. It is the joy of loving and being loved that truly give us that happiness that lasts a lifetime.

The tax collectors also ask, "What should we do?" John answers them back "Stop collecting what is prescribed!" He is challenging us here to stop collecting and holding on to anger and resentment in our lives. Maybe we cannot forget a hurt but we should not let it destroy our lives. It only eats us inside and it takes away the joy of our lives. We have to forgive. We have to let go.

And then in our lives, we have a lot of fears and worries. This is what the soldiers are asking about. John said, "Be satisfied to your wages...." This means we have to stop worrying about earthly things. St. Paul in the second reading reminds us to have no anxiety at all. Most of the times, we are the ones who create our own anxiety for ourselves. Yes, there are things that give us anxiety, which we cannot do anything about. John encourages us to leave them to God. We need to control the things we can control and we let God take the lead on the things we cannot control. We just have to remember that in the end, God does not disappoint us no matter what.

We have heard what are the things we need to do but they amount to nothing if we don't have the will to do them in our lives. We must choose to be joyful. We must choose to share. We must choose to forgive. We must choose to let go. When St. Paul tells the Philippians "rejoice," he is telling them that it is something for them to choose to do rather than it is something that will just happen to them. Someone once said that "most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." This is true because "it is not generally the things outside of us that create stress for us but it is the way how we respond to these things." As such, we should respond to them positively in our lives, with our whole hearts and minds open to John's pleading. We need to be good and we need to do good. Otherwise we won't feel good about ourselves. When the people ask John the Baptist, "what should we do?" He gave them these specific ideas, that is, definite things to do. This tells us that there is more to a good and happy life than just saying, "I want to be happy." We have to live it. We have to practice it. We have to will it in our lives.

Lastly, gratitude is the final key to unlocking our way to joy. It is what binds us to God. He has blessed us abundantly in our lives and so we need to be thankful always because God indeed has been good to us. But again, being grateful is an intentional

thing. It is an attitude we must develop constantly and consistently in our lives. As St. Paul said, "in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." So to the God who is in our midst, we make this prayer intention:

May you always guide our path and brighten our day.

May you always be with us along the way.

May our hearts be filled with happiness,

May our souls beamed with gratefulness

And may our lives in you be blessed always.

Amen.