Gaudette Sunday

December 15, 2024

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word meaning “rejoice”, and the origin of this name for the third Sunday of Advent comes from the beginning of our reading from Philippians today: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice”.

Advent is a penitential season like Lent, something many people don’t realize. Just like how in Lent we use the time to prepare for Easter and reflect on things like our mortality and sin, we do the same in Advent to prepare for Christmas. Thinking about how much we need Jesus helps us get ready to welcome and greet him. It makes the contrast between the penitential season and the major feast leading to a festal season all the greater, and our joy at Christmas and Easter all the brighter. That’s why we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath on the third Sunday of Advent. Pink says joy and celebration!

The theme is apparent in Philippians, “Rejoice” text, but also in Zephaniah, which begins, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!” In our canticle from Isaiah, we say, “Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation”, and “Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy”. So far, so good. We have got this rejoicing thing down.

Then we get to our Gospel, where John the Baptist says, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?… Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”.

So, why this is our gospel for Gaudete Sunday? John was sent to prepare the way. To call people to return to God. In today’s gospel, people repent but then are clueless on how to live. John goes on to give specific answers. If you have an abundance like too many coats, share them. If you are a tax collector or property owner only collect what is owed. Don’t make the poor and working class’s life harder. Justice is also evident in what we think and speak. Thoughts and words are powerful. They have far-reaching long-term effects. For example, if you constantly hear that poor people do not want to work, then you start to believe it. Once you believe it then you do not make an effort to learn how people became poor. You lose the opportunity to connect with people. you lose the opportunity to be just to them. we are called to live justly because when you return to God, God remakes you in God’s image. Justice is one of God’s attributes.

We may not have a lot of power. We may think that our small actions do not matter but they do. And when we return to God and act justly, then God rejoices. We also may feel joy because our actions bring us closer to God.

But what about the difficult passage spoken today by John in his description of what Jesus will do,

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”.

***The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice****in her sermon for Gaudette Sunday says this,*

“We often think of the wheat and the chaff as two different groups of people. The wheat are the virtuous people we wish we could emulate, and the chaff are the poor clueless sinners that we’re all too certain we’re lumped in with. It’s not a very hopeful message.

But what if they’re not two different groups of people? What if we’re all the wheat *and* the chaff? We’re all wheat, brought in as part of God’s harvest, and Jesus in his love for us will cleanse and purify us with his holy fire and burn away those useless things that hold us down and hold us back from fulfilling God’s will. It may not be particularly comfortable, but it will be liberating. That puts rather a more hopeful spin on it, doesn’t it? We’re all a little chaffy, but there is good wheat underneath those obscuring, besetting sins, and Jesus’ love can burn away all the obstacles that prevent us from following him faithfully.

This is news worth celebrating on Gaudete Sunday. This is news worth rejoicing over. This is the knowledge and the truth that we have the ability to make God rejoice every time we act for justice—every time we repent of racism, every time we stand in solidarity with the oppressed, every time we refuse to doggedly hang on to our own ill-gotten power. And, as John the Baptist tells us, these grand ideas are brought to life one interaction at a time, one conversation at a time, one relationship at a time. We might wonder if we have what it takes to live out God’s justice in the world. Well, Jesus comes to us and burns our chaff away so that our wheat might be gathered into the granary, to be used to make the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven”.

So, on this Gaudette Sunday, Rejoice. Rejoice that John calls us back to God. Rejoice that we are here in this place offering our bodies, hearts, and minds to God. Rejoice that Jesus intercedes on behalf of us, and we are forgiven. Rejoice as we follow God and act with justice. Rejoice my people, I say rejoice!