

Homily Advent 3, 2018

We all just heard some very good news. “Shout for joy! ... Your God is in your midst.... He will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you with his love. He will sing joyfully because of you. “

Just try to imagine this. The God of all Creation will sing joyfully because of you, and because of me, and because of every single one of us. That's a lot of joy!

In case you didn't get the message, the key word for today is “joy”. We see it on Christmas cards and banners on storefronts, we hear it in carols, “Joy to the World”, and even in ads for new cars. All year long, in every Mass, during the Our Father the priest states that we “wait in joyful hope” for the coming of the Lord. In fact, this is a good definition of the season of Advent - our time of waiting together in joyful hope for the coming of Emmanuel, both as Jesus who is born in a stable and as Christ the eternal King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The people surrounding John the Baptist in our gospel give us a real snapshot of what this joyful hope looks like. They'd listened to John preach about the one who was to come, and they were really excited about meeting him. They wanted to know where to look for the Promised One. So they asked John this urgent question: “What must we do?”

John looked at each person individually before he answered, since their everyday pathways were different. His replies were very down-to-earth. John knew what our friend Fr. Richard Rohr says so often: “God comes to us disguised as our lives.” So to the first people who asked, John said to share what they had with those in need. In other words, be generous. To the tax collectors, he said don't cheat people and don't be greedy at the expense of others. In other words, be honest. To the soldiers in the crowd, he said don't push people around, and don't oppress them with your power over them. In other words, be kind.

That sounds simple enough. Be generous. Be honest. Be kind. That sounds like a reasonable plan, something we could manage. These readings that are filled with joy offer everyday ways to move close to God.

This brings such a positive message, and heaven knows we all need to “accentuate the positive” in today’s world.

But then John takes a turn into what at first glance seems like darker and more threatening territory. Jesus is pictured standing on the threshing room floor, where he uses a winnowing fan to separate the wheat from the chaff. As a young man, I’ve been there, done that. He gathers up the good wheat, and then he throws the chaff away into the “unquenchable fire.” This image makes sense to farming people, who know that after the harvest there has to be a way to keep the wheat that can be used for food or to plant for future crops, and to get rid of the parts of the plant that are of no use, the chaff. You can’t eat the chaff, and it won’t grow. To many people, this image seemed to be saying that instead of wheat, Jesus would save only the “good” people and throw everyone else away into eternal flames.

But wait a minute. There’s another way of looking at this passage, one that fits better with the Good News of love and forgiveness that fills the rest of his gospel.

In this view, every person in this world is a mixture of good wheat and chaff, with our own “better angels” and worst impulses existing side by side within us. The real purpose of a winnowing fan is to gently blow away the light-weight unwanted parts while the heavier wheat stays put. So instead of a threatening picture, this shows Jesus approaching each of us with tender care, willing to brush away the things we don’t need and allowing the best parts of each person to remain.

And this brings us right back to joy.

Since we use the word joy so much, we must know what it means, right? We all recognize true joy when we experience it, but putting it into words can be tricky. The sight of a newborn child in a parent’s arms, the expression on the faces of a couple coming down the aisle after their wedding, the pure wonder of watching a sunrise over the ocean, the response to the phone call that a lost loved one has been found, watching smiling families leave the Christmas store - there are no words we can use to nail it down precisely. Each person’s experience is unique. But whatever individual pathways to joy we may have traveled, they all lead to the same destination. They all lead deep into each person’s heart and soul

to a place where the God who created us waits to celebrate, and to sing joyfully because of us.

Unlike happiness, joy isn't just a feeling. Feelings can come and go. Instead, joy is a discovery of what's already there. This God-given joy lives deep inside every person created in the image and likeness of God. It may be buried under layers of chaff, of old resentments or bitterness, of bad habits or greed, of spiteful or mean acts, and whatever else we've cluttered our souls with. But Jesus never gives up on us. He's always right there, ready to gently blow away all the useless chaff and let the joy shine through.

This is exactly what the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation is for. It's all about opening ourselves up to the loving presence of Jesus so he can gently blow away all the chaff and clutter that's gotten in our way. All we have to do is let him in. Everyone is invited to come closer by entering into this beautiful experience. No soul is thrown away. No human person is useless or worthless to the God who made us all.

Our Advent Penance Service is Monday evening at 7:30 pm. So this is your personal invitation. Come share the joy.

Let me close with Paul's words from the second reading: Brothers and sisters. Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again, REJOICE! Your kindness should be known to all.