Sermon Proper 24 Year A 2026 (All Saints); Isaiah 45:1-7, Psalm 96, Matthew 22:15-22, 1 Thessalonians.

Gratefulness and Joy: The Way of the Gospel Life

Deciding on a topic to preach about is one of the biggest challenges for the preacher. The lectionary readings are of course important. And so are the current events of the world. For me I may read something that stirs my imagination about a topic to preach about. You've heard that from me before—authors like Richard Rohr, Frederick Buechner, Barbara Brown Taylor, Diana Butler Bass, and others. And then sometimes I'll get an inspiration, often while outdoors, or in prayer, or even during the middle of the night while struggling to sleep when an idea awakens me, an idea that inspires or motivates me. I'll get up and write it down so I can remember it. You will remember that last week I decided to find something about grace in that bizarre parable about the Wedding Banquet gone wrong. I have decided this week to go in a different direction. Each of our readings today has a message. Last week my message was grace, and my primary message today is gratitude or gratefulness.

But first—and this is a little bit of a side track from our message today—I want to say something about Jesus' words we just heard to the religious leaders—the Pharisees and Herodians. These are the people who are trying to trap Jesus, to find a way to have him killed. Jesus' words here show just how insightful and clever he is. Remember the setting: Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. Upon entering the Temple he finds moneychangers and vendors selling all sorts of things. Jesus in anger overthrows the tables, coins flying everywhere. He castigates them, saying they have turned this house that is supposed to be a house of prayer into a den of robbers. This infuriates the religious leaders. He goes on to challenge and embarrass them by telling them the three parables we talked about last week. Still trying to ensnare him—after some unctuous flattery about his reputation for truth telling and his independence of mind—lying through their teeth with their hypocrisy and flattery and hatred, they persist. Here is their game: set him up so that if he answers the question one way the Roman authorities will see him as seditious and arrest him, and if he answers in

another the Jewish authorities will have cause to accuse him of blasphemy. And so they do, and here is their question: “Tell us,” they challenge him, “is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus is of course aware of their hypocrisy, their craftiness, their real motive. He once again uses the rabbinical trick of answering a question with a question. “Why are you trying to entrap me? Show me the coin you pay the tax with.” When they do, he simply points out that the coin already belongs to Caesar since it has his face and name stamped on it, and he gives them one of the great non-answers of all time: “Well then, pay Caesar what belongs to him, and pay God what belongs to God.” It is one of the most brilliant of Jesus’ many statements. No faithful Jew would ever carry a Roman coin with the idolatrous image of Caesar on it, the emperor who claimed to be God. Yet these people did, and Jesus exposes their hypocrisy and idolatry. Now for nearly two thousand years, most people have concluded—incorrectly—that with this response Jesus grants us permission to pay taxes to the empire or the nation/state. He is not saying anything about that, one way or another. If there is any theological message here, Jesus’ statement means simply that everything belongs to God, and that his interrogators don’t practice that. It is the first of a series of skillful parries to his enemies’ thrusts, all of which are designed to deny the authorities—both the Romans and the Jewish leaders—any grounds for prosecuting him. He is walking a legal tightrope, trying to insure that the case they ultimately bring against him will have to be a trumped-up farce, which of course it will be. He is not saying anything here about church and state. He is not offering some theological wisdom about taxes, church, and government. His answer shows nothing more than that he is the consummate fox. This is a masterful piece of waffling, not a treatise on the sacred versus the secular. It is not cool theology but rather crafty avoidance of hot pursuit. Then, amazed at Jesus’ debating skill, they left him and went away.

I had to tell that story. I am thankful for the gospel—the blueprint for living for us here at All Saints. It has such meaningful stories in it, and enlightens for us just who this man Jesus was, and is. Now let’s turn to our psalm today, #96, and thereafter to

the Jewish Bible reading from Isaiah, and finally to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with the Irish rock band U2. It's an Irish group from Dublin. Their lead vocal is Bono. They have received numerous awards including two Golden Globe Awards, and are in the United Kingdom Music Hall of Fame. They are a political and socially conscious group, have campaigned for human rights and social justice, and their lyrics often include spiritual imagery. Their song "40" is a musical adaptation of Psalm 40. It is a psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance and a prayer for help. Some of their lyrics: "I waited patiently for the Lord. He inclined and heard my cry. He lifted me up out of the pit. Out of the miry clay. I will sing, sing a new song. I will sing, sing a new song." The psalm goes on: "He set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." It's a lot like our Psalm 96 today: "Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the whole earth." It too is a song of praise and thanksgiving, of gratitude. Gratitude is also embedded within the words of our The Old Testament reading from Isaiah today. It is about deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Babylonia. God has anointed Cyrus, the king of Persia, to overthrow Babylonia and emancipate Israel. The people were free to return to their homeland and to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem, which they did. Further in Isaiah we read: "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may spring up." The Israelites are free once again, and they are grateful, a gratitude reflected in the building of their new Temple, a monument to God. And now let's look at Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. (Fun fact: this letter is the first written document about our faith Christianity. It was written before any of the gospels.) My wife Cynthia keeps a notebook in which she writes down meaningful passages from scripture. One of the books Cynthia and I are now reading in the morning is The Journey Beyond by Erik Stensland. The book was a gift from Gail Bramer several years ago. Stensland is a photographer who lives on the edge of the Rocky Mountain National Park near Estes, Colorado. The book is a series of meditations, along with fabulous photography, about

how to live healthy and meaningful lives in a divided and angry world—how to live healthy and meaningful lives in a divided and angry world. During our morning reading this past Tuesday his meditation was about gratitude. It reminded Cynthia of a passage from scripture she had written down in her notebook. She looked it up and it was from 1st Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances…" In the reading we just heard today Paul says "We always give thanks to God…" He says something similar to the Philippians, which we read last Sunday: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer…with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God…" (Phil, 4:4-7)

I may be meandering here, but a common theme within these readings today is gratitude. Gratitude has been defined as "the response to God and God's blessings that is an expression of praise and devotion…" One way to think of gratitude is as a response to what we talked about last week, that is grace. Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There is no way to earn it or bring it about any more than you can bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace. Most tears are grace. Somebody loving you or you loving somebody is grace. The grace of God means something like this: "Here is your life. You might never have been but you **are**, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid, because I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you." If only we could remember that always—that we are loved. Like I said last week in the story about the divine salesman trying to give you a car for free: there's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. And what follows naturally is gratitude. Gratitude for what? For this life we have been given. Despite all the hardships we have faced and are still trying to live through—and aren't there a lot of them?—we are thankful for this gift of life, of love, of this church, of this community, of creation itself.

St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (Gal 5:22-23) lists what he calls the nine fruits of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control. Notice joy. I believe it is gratefulness that brings joy—not happiness necessarily, but joy. I will end today with a short meditation by Eric Stensland called “A Life of Joy:”

“With all the suffering and evil in the world, how can anyone live a life of joy? It may seem like you would need to put your head in the sand and live in a dream world, but that isn’t the case at all. A life of joy is possible while living in reality. It does not require denial of what is wrong in the world but rather a wider look at reality. Joy is found by developing an acute awareness of all that is good in the world. Joy becomes a part of who we are as we cultivate a life of awareness and **gratefulness**. David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk from Austria, says it well: “The root of joy is gratefulness…It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.”

Rev. Bob Donnell