
Whatever is Pure

Rev. Shelagh MacKinnon

Dec. 9, 2018

For four years Miss Helen Slater taught me Latin at Fisher Park High School in Ottawa, Ontario. Are there any other Latin students here?

Gaudete means rejoice. This third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudete Sunday - designated by a colour shift from blue to rose in the Advent wreath candles - is the signal that it's OK to start acting more 'Christmasy'. Up until now, Advent tradition has dictated that we be reverent and expectant without being too boisterous, or fixated on Christmas itself. That has created some tension between the religious holiday and the world around us. But starting with Gaudete Sunday, we've got the green light to start getting excited.

And so I invite you to sing with me, just gently, just quietly, just one verse:

“Joy to the World~The Lord is come

Let earth receive her King

Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and angels sing

And heaven and angels sing

and heaven and heaven and angels sing~”

Of course, family holidays are problematic for many people. But this Sunday's name, Gaudete, is the first Latin word in its traditional liturgy; the full line is: “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

Always. Not just “rejoice in the Lord because things are good” or “rejoice in the Lord when something great happens,” but “rejoice in the Lord *always*.”

Those opening lines of the service and a reading in today's Revised Common Lectionary are taken from Philippians 4 and the full passage - not all of which is said on Sunday - offers some very powerful counsel in the face of the prospect of less than perfect family gatherings:

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 and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

(Philippians 4:4-9)

These were my grandfather's favourite verses in Scripture and I'm always struck by how powerfully mystical these paragraphs sound, and how this advice could be found as easily in the Baghavad Gita or teachings of the Buddha: "Do not worry about anything;" "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds."

Even more powerful and significant, especially in the face of tragedy, is the second part: "... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

When confronted with negative ideas and emotions, the difficulty is how to react to the really terrible situations of the world with an open heart, and not to get discouraged to feelings of helplessness. The world around Paul, as he was writing these words, was certainly hostile. He was in prison! In preaching his message of Good News, he was opposed both by his own native Jewish people and by the occupying Roman Empire. And yet Paul says, put your thoughts on what's good and beautiful and keep doing the right things and you will have peace.

Viktor Frankl's evocative writings and indeed, his life, echoed these words: also gleaned from the most difficult of situations imaginable. He urges us to remember that the last and final freedom we have is that to choose our own reactions. The enemies of goodness and life can never take that away from us as long as we can control our thoughts.

Some days it seems like 90% of the viral posts on the internet are about some individual or group going out of their, or its, way to be offensive hostile trolls. Some days it seems like the news we hear from the world is all discouraging. Paul was not unaware of these realities, none of us are, even those of us lighting pink candles. It is about a spiritual choice to insert pink: to meditate on joy.

This is something on which mystics across all faith traditions agree because it is a fundamental universal Truth: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things... [and] peace will be with you.”

There is plenty that is beautiful and good out there. From stories about and experiences of acts of kindness, to love and support from and to those around you, the world is filled with things that show the power of Love. Put your attention on *those* things. I know it lacks ironic hipster detachment and the cynicism of intellectual superiority. It reminds me of a post on Facebook when people are trying to process hard events like school shootings. It’s a photo of Mr. Rogers (Fred Rogers) with an overlaid quote of him saying,

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world.”

Wherever there is hardship and tragedy, there are people helping, sacrificing. That is beautiful. Beauty is there when you look for it, and it can bring us peace.

Maybe that’s naive. But that’s what’s beautiful about it. “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

So, this is Gaudete Sunday, and Paul urges our hearts, “Again I will say, Rejoice. Whatever things are pure, are true, are lovely: think on these things.”