

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Saint Paul's first three instructions call to mind three strong, faithful Christian women of heroic heart who could not live up to them.

Yesterday in this room, a small circle of friends gathered for a kind of memorial service.

The deceased never got the chance to live; she was delivered stillborn.
Her heartbroken mother was not rejoicing.

Last week, my father recalled a conversation with his aunt, a pious Baptist woman who spent years praying for him to reform his wild heathen ways.

One day, after decades of praying for him, she informed him that she had done all she could: he hasn't improved any, her knees have given out, and now he was on his own.

Years ago, a woman was advised by her pastor to give thanks to God for something every day.

She had, in rapid succession, just lost her husband to disease, her daughter to suicide and her son to prison for drugs, and she confessed that in these circumstances, there were days she couldn't do it.

Should we dismiss Paul's instructions as the naive idealism of an overzealous apostle, words probably written with good intentions but which come off sounding cruel and hollow, like so many insensitive, trite clichés of someone who wants to say something comforting but isn't wise enough just to keep their mouth shut instead?

Do we dismiss them by explaining them away as the short-term, high-energy ethic of a man who lived and died his whole life in the mode of Advent, canvassing the Mediterranean at a mid-December style fever pitch because he was certain Jesus was coming back at any moment?

Or is there still value for us in these impossible instructions, a summons we still need to hear?

I remember reading these words with despair as an earnest child in my bedroom, knowing that it was God's will that I follow every commandment in the Bible and knowing with equal certainty that I was going to fail at these, because in my shameful weakness I needed time to sleep and eat and do homework and sometimes be sad, which I couldn't avoid.

Pray without ceasing was going to be particularly problematic because I just couldn't sustain any conversation that long, even with God.

Without realizing it, I was making a mistake that so many believers uncritically make, especially in this culture, this high altitude American context where we breathe the thin air of idealistic individualism.

I was assuming that God was writing only to me.

In fact, God is writing to us, together, as Christian community, through the words once written by overzealous, Advent-minded, and also divinely inspired Saint Paul to the Christian community at Thessalonica.

He fully expected them to *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*, but he expected them to do it together, not alone.

When a woman loses her entire family to tragic choices and circumstances, she cannot give thanks, so her community must do it for her.

When a mother is told that the baby she delivered is dead, she cannot rejoice; she needs a faith community preparing for the birth of baby Jesus, who will himself die too young and too unthinkably on the cross that is our dark, mysterious hope, to do the rejoicing for her.

When Aunt Ruth's knees give out, she needs the rest of us to pick up the prayers where she left off.

It is possible, not for an individual but for a committed community, to *pray without ceasing*. With enough of us dedicated to it, we can listen and speak to God every minute of every day--these directives are impossible for you personally but not for Resurrection Lutheran Church.

Together, taking turns, supporting and sustaining and supplementing one another, we can in fact *rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances*.

Today, together, we rejoice and give thanks for the Friendship Club, a long faithful circle of Resurrection members whose knees are giving out.

They have been praying and serving and glorifying God with their worship and witness around here for countless years, faithful women and men of heroic heart who have more than done their part to advance the sacred baptismal calling of our community...and now, they are tired and it is someone else's turn.

Today, we rejoice and give thanks also that help is on the way.

Eight new members join our family today, fresh knees for prayer, fresh hands for service, fresh voices that can carry the weighty legacy of celebration and song, the Christian burden of gratitude and joy.

One of them, Georgia Roxann, is baptized into Christ this morning, and the same unquenchable Spirit shared by Saint Paul and the Friendship Club and Christians of every place and era and circumstance will be shared with her as well.

She will join the rest of us in the idealistic, impossible and positively joyful calling of God to breathe the Holy Spirit in a world that desperately needs fresh air.

Surrounded by darkness, we testify to the Light.

Stifled by the evening news, we proclaim good news.

Suffocated by despair, we announce hope.

In a world poisoned with insatiable entitlement, we give thanks.

In a society of rampant individualism, we praise and sing and rejoice together as community.

In a culture rife with egomania and power lust and the unbending pressures of impossible demands, we pause and pray.

In systems rigged to reward greed and punish the poor, we pursue justice and generosity.

In an age of division and distrust, we come together and hold fast to one another, sharing bread and stories and responsibilities.

In a time of weight and worry, we celebrate and sing with joy.

There is among us One the world does not know, One who changes everything, like a candle in a dark room.

Georgia Roxann, Friendship Club, New Members, visitors, old-timers, children of God all of you: this One, Jesus Christ, the everlasting covenant, the Light to which we testify, is

with you now and forever, and you are safe in his love *always, without ceasing, in all circumstances.*

Your life is occasion for celebration and service, for promise and praise, and even in your death is hidden the surprise of unending joy.

God has clothed you with the garments of salvation and covered you with the robe of righteousness.

With us, through us, for us and despite us, God will establish justice, bring good news to those who most need it, free the captive, fulfill the promise, and *cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.*

Children of God, *Rejoice and pray and give thanks, for the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*