

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today, in this season of Advent, the Third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday. It is called this because the third Sunday in Advent represents joy or rejoice and the Latin term for rejoice is Gaudete. This is the Sunday that the pink or rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath is lit. This pink or rose-colored Sunday is liturgically colored this way because these colors represent joy. And so, we are reminded not only through the appointed lesson throughout the season, but we are reminded in the midst of our Advent season as the wreath grows brighter, our liturgical colors grow a bit brighter to remind us that as we look and *see*...rather, as we discern and perceive the things around us...may we discern and perceive the anticipation of joy in the coming of Christ and in turn may we rejoice on this Gaudete Sunday.

But as we look forward with anticipation, let us take a moment to look back and reflect, or truly discern the joy and rejoice in our journey through Advent. In the Gospel appointed for the First Sunday of Advent, we heard Jesus say that after the distress of confusion, fear, and foreboding, we:

<sup>27</sup> ...will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. (Luke 21:27)

And last week in the Gospel appointed for the Second Sunday of Advent we heard John the Baptist quoting the prophet Isaiah saying:

<sup>6</sup> ...*all* flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Luke 3:6)

And from this quote from Isaiah last week I talked about Luke's use of the word "see" and how Luke's use of the word is more than a function of the eyes. For Luke this term has more to do with the heart and mind rather than the eyes. For Luke, seeing is discerning, it is perceiving, understanding, recognizing, or experiencing what is happening with the Word of God and what is happening because of that Word within us as we go about our lives in the world that we are all part of.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory...and all flesh shall see salvation...within these lessons appointed for Advent, Luke is reminding us that we will understand, perceive, and experience the Son of Man coming into the world and in the same way we will understand, perceive, and experience salvation. However, today we are being called to consider the depth of our vision, or the depth of our perception, the depth of our discernment and the limits of our recognition and understanding.

We are being challenged today because the one thing we cannot see, the one thing that we cannot fully perceive or fully understand is what is truly in another person's heart. We can do wonderfully righteous things...but no one can see the intent in our hearts. We can simply "do" righteous deeds or works, but what is our intent...what is in our heart? Is it to make ourselves *look* righteous so others "see" us as righteous, or can others "*SEE*" or perceive or experience the grace and love of Jesus Christ. We can "do" wonderful things such as we hear in our Gospel lesson today...or we can give tons of money to a charity, to a cause, or to a need, but is it a tax write off or is the giving genuine...does it mean that I will get my "At-a-boy" from God, along with my name engraved on a building or forever connected to a cause...or do I do it to reflect the grace of God from the goodness of my heart?

Looking at this Season of Advent as a time of preparation or as a time of penance, we are made aware of the needs around us as Christmas grows near, but what is in our heart as we go through this season, or as we go through our lives? Are our actions obligatory and beneficial to “me” or does it reflect God’s goodness driven by faith that lies deep within our hearts? No one can really see what is truly in our heart.

Let’s face it, we can “do” “nice” and we can do charitable things with those we choose, but it seems as though we do this with what the psalmist tells us in Psalm 22, a “double heart.” We do nice but as we do...we continue to be a hateful person to the world because the world or the culture does not think as I do, vote as I do, does not worship as I do, does not follow the law as I do, does not love as I love or live the life-style I do. After all, it’s easy to love those who love us, but I say to you just as Jesus says to us, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (Matt 5:44). This I believe is how God “sees” us...how God understands, perceives, and experiences us and in that there is no hiding nor disguising what is in our heart...this is where God finds us and where God judges us. This is where we will all find ourselves, on that very threshing floor we hear about today in our Gospel lesson, at the mercy of God’s winnowing fork, and on the verge of the unquenchable fire. And as ironic as this Gospel lesson is at this point, and even somewhat humorous as this may seem as we listen to it...it is on the threshing floor that we find the Good News...it is in this very situation that we truly find the Good News today.

It is odd that we hear Luke’s interpretation of John the Baptist telling us that:

<sup>17</sup> [God’s] 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." <sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

It is hard for us to see the Good News immediately following the threat of being thrown into the unquenchable fire...so we generally associate those we dislike with the chaff and ourselves with the wheat. Furthermore, we really don’t associate the threat of being thrown into the unquenchable fire as the Good News, so we like the “crowds” that came out to hear this wonderful and uplifting message are quick to ask, “What then should we do?” (Luke 3:10)

Well, John tells the “crowds” rather John tells the ordinary and even outcast people just as he tells us this day what to do. But as John tells the folks what to do and tells us also, this is one of those passages that will not politically set well with some today because it can make Jesus out to be a socialist, but nonetheless, John tells the crowds which we are a part of:

<sup>11</sup> ..."Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" <sup>13</sup> He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Without getting too political, one can almost feel the unquenchable fire getting a bit warmer as we all get close to that fire...but are we willing or able to bear the *true* fruit of repentance starting within our hearts?

OOH...but we have Abraham! We don't say this today but we do claim a self-perceived privileged standing with God just as the folks who are challenging John do. We claim the moral high ground because we go to church. But by the same token, we can sleep in our garages or sleep in a public parking garage but it doesn't make us a car...just like parking our butts in a church does not make us a Christian. What John is demanding of us, is right living based on a sincere search for God's will.<sup>1</sup> In other words, how are we as confessing Christians living our repentance right now or how are we living our repentance outside of these walls, in that world today that we all complain about but are all very much a part of? Do we use our faith then to disguise our true heart? Is our faith or our true heart covered in a hard candy shell of bitterness and hate in order to protect our heart or our faith from melting in the hands of the world and the culture?

Today, John calls for a change of life-style that reflects the genuineness of our repentance. In other words, John is challenging us to look, to see the true nature of our faith or the true nature of our repentance...and live accordingly...but do we just pick and choose the depth of our repentance? Do we pick and choose how our faith is to work in order to prevent others from "seeing" our true heart? Do we then model how repentance and faith plays out in the world to protect and to reflect our own concepts of repentance and faith?

Listen again to how John the Baptist explains the Good News to the people who had come out filled with expectation...but listen to how it speaks to each of us today:

<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

With His winnowing fork in his hand, God will clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Here is the Good News!!! But here is why...this is Good News. Chaff is the dry, scale-like protective casing of a grain. Chaff is separated from the seed during threshing. In other words, the "chaff" or the hard protective shell around our hearts, the hard-protective shell that hinders our perception, hinders our understanding, or the stubborn chaff that keeps us from recognizing and experiencing the power of grace and forgiveness as it is given to others as easily and as freely as it is given to each of us. The chaff is that casing around our hearts that restricts our repentance and faith from what it truly is. This chaff is our very human nature that is a hard-dry-scalelike shell that will be separated from the grain of faith...no matter the size of the grain...the gain of faith that is in each of us is encased in the chaff of our humanness. But our faith will be separated from the chaff of humanness and that grain of repentance and faith will be gathered into God's glorious granary. The winnowing fork is the cross that calls us all to the threshing floor and separates the wheat from the chaff, or the kernel of faith from the hard-hearted-humanness of sin.

So as we live out our repentance in the distress of confusion, fear, and foreboding during this Season of Advent, on this Gaudete Sunday I say:

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Book, NRSV.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. This comment is from the footnotes of chapter 3, verse 8 in the Gospel According to Luke, page 82, in the New Testament.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

These very words from our second lesson come from a man sitting in the darkness of a prison...and writes them because he has repented and his faith calls him to REJOICE. Even from the darkness of that prison we *see*, we recognize and experience the kernel of Paul's faith and NOT chaff of human hard-heartedness...we hear in this letter the heart of Paul's faith in his words that Gaudete...that rejoice always.

May we too rejoice this day in the blessed gift of forgiveness and life that is always coming into our world in the form of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior...given to us all to free us from the restrictive hard-heartedness of our human nature and gather us all into God's glorious granary...

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*