

TEXT: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
THEME: The one who calls you is faithful
SUBJECT: The will of God
TITLE: The Imperative

Third Sunday of Advent
13 December 2020
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

“Not many things that I have been *ordered to do under obedience* have been as difficult for me as is this present task of writing about prayer. First, it doesn’t seem the Lord is giving me either the spirit or the *desire* to undertake the work. Second, I have been experiencing now for three months such great noise and weakness in my head that I’ve found it a hardship even to write concerning necessary business matters.

“But, *knowing the strength given by obedience* usually lessens the difficulty of things that seem impossible, I resolved to carry out the task very willingly, even though my human nature seems greatly distressed. For the Lord hasn’t given me so much virtue that my nature in the midst of its struggle with continual sickness and duties of so many kinds doesn’t *feel strong aversion* toward such a task.”

These words from the prologue of Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle* (1577), came to mind as I read the epistle lesson for today. Teresa lamented to her confessor, a Carmelite Friar, “Oh, how well this point was described in the book about my life, which is in the hands of the Inquisition!”

Fr. Gratian responded: “Since we cannot have it, recall what you can and other things and write another book, but put down the doctrine in a general way without naming the one to whom the things you mentioned there happened.” And I thus *ordered* her to write this book.

The epistle lesson for today contains eight imperatives, orders. Paul describes the first three imperatives—rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances—as the will of God for you. In short, orders. I don’t always feel like rejoicing. I have other things to do but pray, and giving thanks in all circumstances strikes me as impossible.

Teresa *feels a strong aversion* to doing what she was ordered to do, but she refuses to be governed by her feelings. She acts according to the will of her confessor rather than doing as she wishes. The will of the confessor was understood as an expression of the will of God.

Thomas Merton believes the whole Christian life consists in seeking the will of God by loving faith and carrying out that will by faithful love. Sometimes, maybe more often than I want to admit, I prefer to seek the fulfillment of my own will which isn’t always so loving.

Truth be told, we are not fans of obedience to any will but our own. However misguided it may be, at least we are doing what *we want* to do and not what someone else thinks we should do. Knowing a strength that comes from obedience strikes us as an odd if not alien notion. How can

I become stronger by obeying the will of another? Doesn't that make me weaker, subservient, servile even?

It is easy for us to justify doing what we want as doing the loving thing. This may involve a confusion of sometimes inordinate desire for love. Merton believes it is a mistake to appeal to love against obedience. It is also an error to reduce all love to obedience alone as if the two were synonymous. Just ask a spouse in an abusive relationship, an employee of a horrible boss, a child betrayed by the Church or by the Boy Scouts.

Love is something much deeper than obedience, but unless obedience opens up those inner spiritual depths our love will remain superficial, a matter of sentiment and emotion, little more. Without obedience our love will be subjective and uncertain. If Teresa had followed the dictates of her feelings rather than obey her confessor, history would have been deprived of an astute analysis of the soul's relationship to God which has enriched the lives of its readers for five hundred years.

If the will of God for us is love, nothing but love, love always, love actually, why can't I trust that rejoicing always, praying incessantly, and giving thanks in everything will strengthen me in love? To be clear, we are not asked to give thanks *for* everything but *in* everything. We are not asked *to do* nothing but pray, but *to do* all things prayerfully. We are not asked to rejoice as a *response* to the circumstances we encounter, but *to make* rejoicing the preeminent attitude of our lives.

Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks saves us from narcissism, from being slaves to our whims and predilections. Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks redirects our attention from ourselves to God, to our neighbor, to creation itself. Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks are not optional extras in life, but the fundamental activities for knowing happiness and for being in harmony with reality.

That, I realize, is a large claim so let me enlist the testimony of greater authorities. David Ford and Daniel Hardy, son-in-law and father-in-law, both exceptional Anglican theologians, argue that the activities of rejoicing, praying and giving thanks expand our capacity for happiness and for knowing reality. When we insist on serving our self-interest we senselessly use our freedom to spoil joy and incapacitate ourselves for anything except misery. Rejoicing, praying and giving thanks integrate us into a world of meaning otherwise unknowable.

These activities, which are the will of God for us, are meant to allow the wonder of life that usually comes to us only in quickly fading moments to become instead a constant inclination of mind and will, a stable condition of the soul rather than a passing mood. Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks are dispositions of the soul before God that free us from habitual prejudices and appetites and allow us to dwell in the gratuity and glory of all things.

Of all the states in the USA, South Dakota has the highest positivity rate for COVID-19 and the highest rate of hospitalization. Yet, attempts by city councils from Sioux Falls to Mitchell to mandate the wearing of face masks are met with outcries of "hoax."

In Sioux Falls, one man told the city council that face masks were the new symbol of tyranny. In Mitchell, a young mother told the city council, “I will stand against the government stripping us of our freedoms, liberties, rights all because of a fabricated pandemic. The bare face is the new yellow star of Nazi Germany.”

Mandates, orders, imperatives. We don't like them. We resist them to the point of senselessly using our “freedom” to incapacitate ourselves for anything but misery and to endanger the health and safety of others.

As Abba Benjamin was dying he told his sons, “If you observe the following, you can be saved, ‘Be joyful at all times, pray without ceasing, in all things give thanks.’”

Rejoicing, praying, giving thanks is the will of God for you. Carrying out the will of God by faithful love will save your soul.

PRAYER: Book of Common Prayer

O God, the author of peace and the lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries. Amen.