

“Rejoice in the Power of the Spirit.”

Have you ever heard part of a song or a few seconds of a speech or a snippet of a movie that you recognized but could not identify the source? It can be so frustrating. Nowadays we have the internet to help us out. You type in the words, and it often will bring back just the information we need. In the time before the internet (yes, there was such a time, youngsters), we might go around for days singing a snippet of a song or repeating a few words to friends, family, and even strangers as we tried to figure out the earworm that was plaguing us.

Today you might have encountered what might appear to be an earworm in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Some of the phrases may seem familiar, but the order and the words surrounding the phrases are not the same. Part of the reason is that this is not the only time that Paul wrote these words. He also wrote them in another epistle, his First Letter to the Thessalonians. It is a paraphrase of that passage that you hear me say on some Sunday mornings. Do you have any idea what I am referring to? That is something I say that has words similar to this passage from Romans.¹

These are the verses from First Thessalonians that are paraphrased into the words I say in the service.

“And we urge you, brothers and sisters, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 NRSVUE

Does that help? They sound very similar to the words we heard today from Romans. The verses from Thessalonians inspired the dismissal I sometimes use. That dismissal was so popular at the Celtic service at St. Stephen's that when we tried to interchange it with other dismissals, the congregation rebelled. Those words were so powerful and so comforting to them that they wanted to hear them every week. As reshaped into a dismissal, I think they provide a wonderful way to end a service and send us out into the world. It has admonitions for us as followers of Christ. It also encourages us to find joy in God's Spirit.

The version we heard today from the Letter to the Romans starts with love.² In just five words, Paul challenges us to do something that many people find very hard to do. He writes, "Let your love be genuine." We know he is not talking about romantic love or familial love; he means the love that we have in Christ for one another, sometimes called *agape*. That love is a love of caring, helping, aiding, and uplifting others. We may admonish those who have failed, but we do not stop loving them. Our love is a love that wants the best for the other. There should be no gossiping, telling tales, shaming, or anything else hurtful among the faithful. This is a love that helps us live fully into our relationship with God.

The only time Paul uses the word hate in this passage is to describe how we should respond to evil. We should hate it while holding onto what is good. And here comes another admonishment to love one another. The people in Rome and Thessalonica must have had some trouble with loving each other, or maybe it was Paul's hang-up. Regardless, he attaches showing honor for each other to that love.

He then gets into the work of the Spirit. He affirms the need for an "ardent spirit" that shows zeal in service to Christ.

² Romans 12:9-21

Even as we serve Christ, we should rejoice in hope, continue in prayer, and be patient in suffering. Paul knew a lot about suffering. He had been pelted with stones, whipped, jailed, and persecuted by religious leaders and the Empire. Yet he did not falter in his zeal for God. Paul also wanted the Roman congregation to care for each other by sharing their resources. Additionally, it was not enough to care for one another, but the congregation must also care for strangers.

In the last section, Paul alternates between how we should act in the face of evil and how we should act with each other. We should bless those who are our persecutors, just as Jesus did from the cross. When confronted with evil, do not repay in kind. Neither should we avenge ourselves. That is God's prerogative. He might have added that it is only love which can overcome evil. Evil begets evil until we break the cycle by choosing love.

His last admonitions are to show compassion. We must rejoice with the rejoicing and weep with the weeping. Live in peace with one another. Do not be arrogant instead, but consort with the lowly. Finally, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." That last bit seems retributive and may not be consistent with his other admonitions.

Paul has quite a list of attributes and rules that we should follow. I expect most of us will stumble, as I expect the Romans and Thessalonians did. Paul does not want us in competition to be good. I daresay we could make a sport of it, going tit for tat as we tried to outdo one another on the ladder of sanctity and piety. But that is not what God wants.

God and Paul want true inner transformation. They desire that we turn away from evil. We are called to be our best self in the eyes of God. We are called to fan the flame of love for God

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and all that God created, whether that be the natural world or the humans who inhabit it.

It is not easy. No one said it would be. But as Paul admonished us, and as our dismissal does also, when we leave this place, we should “Go out into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.”