

When you look at an Advent wreath, what color do you see? It depends where you are. Here at First United, the candles are blue. But you've probably seen other colors as well. When looking for a graphic to use on our Facebook page, I found that almost all of them had purple candles – or rather three purple and one pink (or rose). There can be a lot of confusion around the colors and names and meanings of the Advent candles. Originally, from the 4th century on, the color of Advent was purple, the same as in Lent. And the mood of Advent was the also the same as Lent; it was a somber, penitential season, focusing on the Second Coming of Christ.

So where does the pink candle come in? On the traditional church calendar, the Third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday (pronounced gow-DAE-tae), which means "rejoice" in Latin. And it was meant to be a break from the rigors of the solemnity of Lent, just like the Fourth Sunday of Lent. And we can see how this is still emphasized: "Shout for joy, fair Zion" (from Zephaniah), *With Joy Draw Water from the Well* (our psalm hymn), and most of all, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, "Rejoice always; and again I say, rejoice".

Except we have blue candles. In recent years, blue, symbolizing hope, has become an alternative. In fact, in 1978 the Lutheran Book of Worship recommended blue as the preferred color for Advent. Now to make it even more complicated, you'll often see Advent wreaths with three blue candles and one pink. And being my one-ish stickler self, it's always bugged me: why would we need a break from hopefulness? Why would we need a "Joy" Sunday? So my Advent rule was always "No pink candles!"

But regardless of color, the "rejoice" theme seems to have stuck. And this year, in light of our theme of "Hungering for God," we can come at this idea of rejoicing from a different direction – not as a break from a Lenten-like fast, but as a reminder of what real Advent joy is – even in the midst of heartache, hunger, and longing. Because blue also has another meaning.

What does it mean if I say I'm feeling blue? It means that I'm sad for some reason. And the fact is that many people, for whatever reason, find it difficult to feel joyful at this time of year. There is even a liturgy called "Blue Christmas" (I wrote about it in *Keeping in Touch*), and in this setting the color signifies, not hope, but sadness (of course you're all hearing Elvis' "Blue Christmas" in your minds right now). But seriously, "Blue Christmas" is meant to acknowledge the reality of grief, sadness, seasonal affective disorder, family discord, whatever, and an attempt to bring the Christmas message to even those who cannot get into the "holiday spirit."

Now, for all of you who are happily decking the halls and having yourselves a merry little Christmas, this is not a criticism. But as I've been hearing feedback from this Advent theme, it seems that there are many more people who struggle with Advent longing or sadness, especially around all the expectations of happy families, perfect presents, and all the trappings of TV holiday specials. It's hard not to get caught up in it. The ad from Macy's this morning declares: "The More the Merrier." And each ad for watches and perfume and jewelry has the word "Believe" floating above it.

It's everywhere, and we think everyone else has it all together, so we'd better just get with the program and deck the halls. Even if "Blue Christmas" doesn't describe you, I'll bet it describes someone you know or maybe even yourself in the past or some future time. In any event, we can be compassionate towards ourselves and inclusive of others, knowing that there is a much bigger reality going on here than even Macy's can imagine – that is the always-to-be-expected birth of Christ into our hearts.

But just as the people reacted to John the Baptist's preaching by crying, "What then should we do?" we too want some practical advice. As we were planning our interspirituality conference, we were clear that we didn't want just words, but practical applications. And the same need is here as well. How can we, in the practical day-to-day realities of life, bring together "Joy" Sunday and "Blue Christmas"?

It is the Philippians text that answers the question. For all of Paul's faults, he gets a handle on this dilemma. And his credentials are excellent. Two things we know about Paul's circumstances when he wrote to the Christians at Philippi: he is in prison and he is joyful. It's quite a paradox that, despite his loss of freedom and the possibility of a death sentence, he finds it possible to have a joyful spirit. Or, as he writes in 2 Corinthians of being "sorrowful yet always rejoicing." Maybe if he was able to find that path, we can too – even as we face our ongoing challenges and longings of body, mind, and spirit.

In Philippians, Paul makes us a promise - because God is with us in every single moment of life, then it is possible for us to experience God's peace, God's shalom in every situation. And when we enter into a practice of relationship with God, then we'll know "the peace of God, which passes all understanding." That's the promise. But it's not an abstract promise. Paul's answer is concrete: the way to peace and joy is through practicing gentleness, prayer, and non-anxiety.

First, practicing gentleness, which sounds good to a point, but maybe unrealistic in the real world. It would be seen as weakness. Paul was not weak, what did he mean to have a gentle spirit? What if we defined gentleness as the commitment to treat everyone as Christ? How do we do that? By loving our neighbor, by curbing our tongues instead of making hurtful remarks, by listening to another's story and seeing them in their best light and inner goodness, rather than in terms of our ego and defensiveness. By using language of gratitude, compassion, and welcome, even in conflict. Imagine if everyone followed that practice! Imagine if I followed that practice.

Second, Paul calls us to pray in all circumstances (that would include the ability to practice gentleness). And this practice of prayer need not be a difficult chore, fraught with worry about doing it right or often enough or saying the proper words. Prayer can be as formal as our written petitions, but it can also be (or actually more-so be) what we do all the time. When we recognize the intimacy of our relationship with God, that there is no separation, and we can see all of life as prayer, everything we say and do as prayer. It is as if we are breathing prayer in and out. As Paul also says elsewhere: "pray without ceasing."

Pastor Bruce Epperly: "Pray your tears, pray your fears...pray with each breath (tell your unconscious to align itself with God's passion for each moment) . . . pray when you pick up the phone or send an e-mail . . . Give thanks...for this beautiful day . . . for the next breath . . . for your congregation . . . for new ideas . . . for a kind word . . . for the opportunity to grow through difficult experiences. As long as you pray, you're not alone, nor are you hopeless . . . prayer connects us with a well-spring of possibilities, divine insights, and the energy to bring goodness to ourselves and others."

Finally, Paul says, practice non-anxiety. His words "Dismiss all anxiety from your minds" remind us of Jesus in Matthew 6, "Do not worry about your life". That is one of my favorite passages, probably because I find it such a difficult thing to do. Yesterday's devotion from Richard Rohr in *Preparing for Christmas*: "I have never been busier in my life than I have been recently. What right do I have to talk about contemplation when I have been living on overdrive?" "What decreases in a culture of affluence is time, along with wisdom and friendship.

These are the very things that the human heart was created for, that the human heart feeds on and lives for. No wonder we are producing so many depressed, unhealthy, and even violent people. while also leaving a huge carbon footprint on this poor planet.”

It's human nature to be anxious, especially when confronted with poverty, hunger, war, global warming, the economy, and all the other troubles of life. Paul tells us to stop, be anxious about nothing, no exceptions. Worry has been called the sour fruit of a godless tree rooted in fear rather than faith. We know that, but how many of us stop worrying just because someone tells us to? So how do we stop?

Paul's advice is to give thanks. Sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? But Paul isn't delusional or in denial. He's reminding us to count our blessings, give thanks and practice God's presence in the midst of trials and tribulations. I used to look askance at a friend whose answer to “How are you?” was always “I'm blessed” because I knew the difficulties she had in her life. But she was just following the practice outlined by Paul. What would happen if the next time someone asks what you think about the economy, you say that you are thankful or you are blessed?

Again, it's not a practice of burying our heads in the sand and ignoring our problems or the problems of the world. But it is a practice of gratitude, which leads to non-anxiety, which then opens us up to joy – real joy - the kind that lives in the midst of sorrow, that goes on even after the decorations are put away and the January blahs set in.

This is the kind of rejoicing that we talk about on this Third Sunday in Advent, in this season of active expectation of always-being-born presence of Christ into our hunger and deepest longings.

So whether you are experiencing a Blue Christmas, or a pink, or purple one – rejoice. And again I say it, and not out of lack of understanding or compassion, but in the full and certain knowledge of Emmanuel-God-with-us – rejoice!

Amen