

In All Circumstances  
 Reading from the Old Testament: 2 Chronicles 5:13-14  
 Reading from the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Every morning, there's a choice. You may not be in control of your schedule. You may not have the freedom to decide what body part will be screaming at you today. You may not have the power to choose the mood of the people you encounter throughout the day. You cannot control the weather, nor beg out of the meeting, avoid the duty, ignore the deadline, escape the complaints, reject the responsibility, or manipulate the masses. The day will bring what the day will bring. Thus, the question is not necessarily what you will face, but how you will face it amidst the noise, the news, the static, the distractions, the babel.

Tragedy, calamity, got me feeling raggedy.  
 Insanity, stupidity, streamin' screens in front of me.

Everywhere I turn, some dope wants a piece of me.  
 Foolishness, churlishness, labeled as reality.  
 Con men, white men, talkin' smack incessantly.  
 Don't play their game, 'cause they're tryin' to make a fool of me.  
 Remote control twitchin', 'bout to get the best of me.

One click, betta make it Two clicks,  
 Some folks can never let it go, go, go, go  
 People seekin' clarity, won't be found on Hannity,  
 Everywhere conspiracy, nothin' short of lunacy.

One click, betta make it Two clicks,  
 Some folks can never let it go, go, go, go.  
 Remote will be the death of me,  
 Gotta get ahold of me.  
 Find a different recipe  
 What about eternity?  
 What will I do?

When the mind starts to reeling,  
 anxiety you're feeling,  
 The headlines vex you, kids didn't text you,  
 politicians enrage you, opinionators bore you.

One click, ya betta make it Two clicks,  
 Some folks can never let it go, go, go, go.

Alexa's listening, Siri's always sniffing,  
 Privacy is missing, Everybody's snooping.  
 Neighbors' eyes fence you,  
 judge you, belittle you, maybe even cancel you.  
 Well, whatcha gonna do?

Turn off the TV, update the RSV,  
 Open up the Bible, never let it idle.  
 Join Paul in full accord,  
 Tryin' to follow the risen Lord.

Pray unceasingly,  
 Give thanks continually,  
 Rejoice perpetually,  
 For all the world to see. Peace.

Did you know, long before Slim Shady or Jay Z or preachers  
 mangling the art of rap, the Apostle Paul was trending on the hip-hop  
 charts, busting a rhyme or two. Our text today could be exhibit 1, not in

the English translation, but in the original Greek. Like a *Def Jam* artist riffing on stage, Paul and his co-authors, Silvanus and Timothy, lay down a series of short staccato-paced rhyming imperatives, offering a hook for the Thessalonians, and subsequently us, to grasp and memorize as with a youth who regularly rehearses the dialogue from a favorite movie or the lyrics from a classic adolescent anthem. In my day, if you could quote the French guard scene from *Monty Python's Holy Grail* or recite a verse from *Rapper's Delight*, you were bona fide.

You see, I'm [five foot some], and I'm tons of fun  
When I dress to a T,  
You see, I got more clothes than Muhammad Ali  
And I dress so viciously.

Thessalonica was a coastal city on the Aegean Sea in the Greco-Roman territory of ancient Macedonia. Founded in 316 B.C.E. by the Greek general Cassander, Thessalonica was named after Cassander's wife, who also happened to be the daughter of Alexander the Great, so Cassander gets the double bonus of schmoozing both his boss and his father-in-law when he plants the pole for the city limit sign. When Macedonia became a Roman province in 148 B.C.E., Thessalonica ascended in importance, becoming the administrative center for the territory. As with any growing city, there was an increasing diversity of

cultures, some more tolerant than others. In Thessalonica, you would find cults dedicated to Serapis, the Greco-Egyptian god of the sun whose dog may have eclipsed his own publicity over time - Cerberus, the three-headed canine that guarded the gate of the underworld. In addition, Thessalonica hosted a cult faithful to the Cabiri, a group of minor Hellenistic deities connected to the sea and the protection of sailors and vessels.

At the time Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written, the Christian congregation in Thessalonica was still a new church development. In fact, 1 Thessalonians is the oldest extant literature in the New Testament, written around 50 CE, just twenty years removed from Christ's public ministry. Curiosity about these Christians had evolved into suspicion. As such, the nascent Thessalonian Christians faced significant opposition to the point that Paul, Timothy, and Sylvanus had been forced out of the city.

Thus, in writing to the Thessalonian congregation, Paul faced the challenge of offering basic instruction and guidance to a people new both to the way of Christ and life together in Christ. Acknowledging the vulnerability of new disciples, it was also crucial for Paul to encourage

the Thessalonians in the face of opposition and outside pressures. It is to this end that Paul goes hip hop and lays down a rhyme, giving the Thessalonians a mnemonic device to both guide and encourage believers, no matter what the day brings: χαίρετε, προσεύχεσθε, εὐχαριστεῖτε – rejoice, pray, give thanks – not just occasionally or now and then, but as translated in English, always, without ceasing, in all circumstances.

Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in all circumstances.

In all circumstances? Even in those bedeviled days when you lose your keys, spill coffee on your new coat, feel the telling bump from behind that means insurance adjusters, body shops, and rental cars when you were already pressed for time?

In all circumstances? Even when physically threatened, emotionally molested, frightened, angry, trapped, imprisoned, or humiliated?

In all circumstances? Even when lonely, feeling forgotten, passed over, estranged, disenfranchised, robbed of dignity, isolated in a crowd, and no one seems to know your name?

In all circumstances? Even after the diagnosis, or the call from the nursing home, or seeing the EMTs taking your beloved out the front door of the house you've shared for sixty years, over the threshold he will not cross again? In all circumstances?

Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in all circumstances. Come on, Paul! Get real. Granted it looks good in cross-stitch or artfully painted on distressed shiplap, but doesn't it sound glib, superficial, disingenuous in this precarious journey through the flawed, stormy, detritus strewn trail called life? Who's singing *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee* when the bills come due, the kid's headed to rehab, the homeless are still homeless, and affordable can't be found in the lexicon of far too many Charlotteans?

Some days it seems you're knocking on Jesus' door unceasingly, but there is no answer, and all you get out of it are bloody knuckles. Some days, your thanks in all circumstances sound a lot like sarcasm,

like *Gee! Thanks a lot :-)*, as in *Thanks for nothin'*. Some days, your rejoicing sounds as authentic as the congratulations from the person passed over for the job. So, are Paul's rhyming commands capable of escaping that damning adjective called trite?

Pastors who are younger or newer to ministry than me are forced to endure a form a hazing called Clinical Pastoral Education. Imagine, if you will, having an emotional colonoscopy without anesthesia ... under klieg lights ... in a group setting. No place to hide. They **will** find the chinks in your armor. They **will** blow the doors off of awkward, probing to expose all the secret and subconscious contents of the hidden closets and drawers of your inner being; take it all out for a photo with your group; put it back; and then make you write a paper about it.

Now, I'm not well-versed in CPE enough to know the fundamental, underlying purpose of it, but an important part of being a pastor, or a deacon, or a friend is to sit alongside someone in all circumstances including pain, trauma, loss, emptiness, embarrassment, disorientation, or disillusionment. Be present in those places to represent Christ to them, not Pollyanna, mind you, but Christ.

And to do this, you have to understand a bit about your own vulnerability so that you can understand a bit about theirs. You have to inhabit the uncomfortable space. You have to be able to weather the awkward, handle the silence, and train your brain in the way of deep listening.

You're not there to offer platitudes of optimism, but to be present to them in a way which communicates that even in the dark places where everything is anything but *okay*, and everything may not be *okay* for a long time, Christ values them, knows them by name, weeps with them, stays with them, accepts their pain without reservation, holds them in prayer, and even laughs with them through the tears at life's ironies and contradictions.

Too many evangelists proffer the illusion that if you just pray enough or pay enough or are pure enough, you will prosper, heal, and never walk in darkness. But that's not life as we know it and that's not love as Christ reveals it.

Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in all circumstances. You know what keeps those words from being shallow,



artificial, empty? Because we are here as God's people: flawed, often disoriented and doubtful, never as pure as the driven snow, incapable of having all the answers. And yet, here we are, together, and God is with us. Knowing all about our messiness and choosing to be present with us anyway, even claiming us as God's own and this place as God's house, our Lord provides us with Word and Sacrament in a way that equips us to support one another, bless one another, and even charge one another to represent Christ's eyes-wide-open, relentless love to a world in pain. Jesus said, "This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends (*The Message*)."

Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks in all circumstances. What borrows these words from the cross-stitch on the wall and makes them real in the lives we lead is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as experienced here in community, in worship, and in relationship.

Among the most meaningful moments of my life have taken place in the most vulnerable moments of our days: as when sitting alongside others facing the mystery of death when loss is raw and real, and yet,

the stories are rich and treasured, and the love-laced laughter is profound and deep. I experience it in my own vulnerable moments, you know, the kind in hospital gown and gurney before the surgery or procedure when my wife's eyes proclaim the compassion of a love that would climb mountains to take the pain away while still maintaining the capacity to share the laughter that gets God's sense of humor as revealed in these odd, peculiar, capricious cadavers enlivened by God's own breath.

Rejoice always. Pray unceasingly. Give thanks continually. God's gift of life and love are worth it. Amen.