

Advent 3
December 11, 2011
Christ the King
Kenner, LA

What's On Your List?

Text: 1Thessalonians 5:16-24

We all know who's "making a list and checking it twice." To be on the safe side, there's a small sign hung with my stocking which says, "Dear Santa, is it too late to be good?" It's a plea for mercy.

I'm an incorrigible list-maker. How about you? Do you also make lists of things you need to do, people you should contact, work to get done, groceries to buy, repairs to be made? I make lists of what to pack for a trip, people to pray for, books to purchase. I've also got lists of parishioners to contact, children to be baptized, weddings being planned, and people who have expressed an interest in becoming members. Just now I've actually made a list of lists.

And during December the list gets even longer. Who to get gifts for, who to send cards to, who to give cookies or fruitcakes to. (By the way, it's OK to remove me from the fruitcake list, if you mean the edible kind). But I've discovered that what I really like about lists, is checking stuff off. "Did that, got that, finished that."

How's your list coming along? If you don't mind, I'd like to add a few things to your list, and mine as well.

Actually, these are items which we won't be able to check off by Christmas. And they're not my suggestions. They come from St. Paul.

And they're not just add-ons to our usual list, like lagniappe, but should be right at the top, the very first things we do.

So even if you're one of those who finished all your Christmas shopping in October, and have everything else checked off your list in preparation for the big day, here are some things you may have overlooked, some important items to add while you still have time.

And for the rest of us who are in the middle of our lists or haven't even begun them, here are the absolute essentials from St. Paul's list in today's Second Lesson, his first letter to the Thessalonians. He says (and by the way, you're going to need this waiting in lines in the stores and at the post office or even sitting at a computer screen to make purchases on-line), "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." In other words, "this isn't just me talking," Paul's telling us. He continues with these as well, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets. . . hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil."

Let's take a closer look at that list. "Rejoice always" That's why this Third Sunday in Advent is called Joy Sunday, because the lessons reflect that theme year after year. Paul's repeating what he wrote to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). "Rejoice always"? Really? Yes, really, if it's in the Lord. We certainly don't always rejoice in crowds, or standing at store registers, or looking

for parking places. But rejoicing in the Lord? Oh yes, that restores some balance in this season when we usually hear so many complaints.

Next on Paul's list is, "Pray without ceasing." We'll never be able to scratch this one off either because it'll never be complete.. But Advent is a good time to start practicing prayer, heart-felt prayer, longer-lasting prayer in which we offer everything up to God in an uninterrupted act of devotion. How can we keep our sanity the next two weeks without that? And not just the next two weeks, but all the time from now till Christ's return.

Added to that, Paul says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." This year especially with so much economic uncertainty in the world, we should be particularly thankful, whatever our circumstances, both the one per-centers and the 99 per-centers, all of us who occupy this world God has given us. It's his world and our lives are in his loving hands. We're going to be all right. So we will "give thanks in all circumstances."

Next on his list: "Do not quench the Spirit." What does that mean? How can we douse the flame of the Holy Spirit within us? I think we've all experienced some of this, especially each December when we wonder if the frenzy and commercialism of the season is going to upstage the real event, if the gift-giving will obscure our celebration of God's great gift. By now you've probably heard about the little boy in the department store,

seeing the line of kids waiting to visit Santa, who asked his mother, “where’s to line to see Jesus?”

Well, the line forms here. I can’t say this enough. Parents or Godparents or grandparents need to bring the children to Sunday School’s Power Hour and church. So many of our children are being deprived of the Christian education provided by the church. It’s a shame. Their spirit, the flame of faith begun at baptism, is being quenched. You want to give the children on your list a great gift this Christmas? Take them to church. And don’t let your own spirit be quenched by the season’s frenzy either. I’m always amazed by those who say they can’t come to worship services because they interfere with other holiday plans. Don’t let all that quench your spirit. Don’t let the important get in the way of the essential.

Next on Paul’s list: “Do not despise the words of prophets.” I’d say, first and foremost, make sure you know the words of the prophets. So here’s your invitation to join the 9:15 Sunday morning Adult Forum in which we’re currently studying the messianic prophecies of Advent.

Finally, “hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil.” That’ll never be checked off as completed either. In fact, we should probably add another one, as a result of our failure: “Confess and rely on Christ’s mercy.”

Did you know that God has made a list also, and the wonderful thing is that your name is on it. Scripture calls his list “the book of life.”

Jesus' disciples once marveled at all the miracles they saw happening, and Jesus told them, "don't rejoice at that. . . but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

The Bible also tells us about heaven. Who's there? "Those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27). Not those who have been nice rather than naughty, but those mentioned by John the Baptizer, whose sin has been taken away by Christ, the Lamb of God. Who's in that book of life? Those whose sin has been removed, forgiven. And again, John the Baptizer points us to Christ, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "The world." That's all of us.

Even better than a list, even a list the length of a book, God tells us through the prophet Isaiah (49:16), "I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." That's how much he cherishes us.