

The Pink Candle Philippians 4:4-7

Long before the arrival of Christianity, Northern Europeans celebrated a number of winter festivals in which they decorated with evergreen branches formed into a circle and lit with candles. The evergreen branches reminded the folks that the cold, harsh winter would not destroy all life. The circle reminded them of the cycles of the seasons and that spring and summer would soon return. Slowly these traditions were appropriated into Christianity and, at some point in the process, the Advent wreath as we know it today came into being.

Some suggest it has roots that extend all the way back to the middle ages. Some theorize that the practice originated in Germany, perhaps before or around the time of the Reformation. Still others insist that it is a much more modern tradition and wasn't invented until the 19th century.

According to one of the world's most highly regarded scholarly sources, Wikipedia, one theory holds that a 19th century German pastor designed the Advent wreath. This particular pastor was a pioneer in urban ministry in his day. He worked closely with the poor and ran a mission school. Daily, during Advent, the children would ask him if it was Christmas yet. Wanting to give them a visual countdown to the feast day, the pastor created a little wheel with four large white candles and 19 small red candles. The large white candles were lit on Sundays, while the small red candles were lit during the week. From this humble beginning, a tradition was born and spread. By the early 20th century it was simplified to just four or five candles, and around 1920's it hopped over the pond and became a tradition here in America as well.

There are a number of different ways to arrange the Advent wreath. In our church, we use three purple candles and one pink candle, with a white candle in the center. It is decorated with evergreens and holly, of course.

The evergreens symbolize immortality, life's victory of death; the circular shape symbolizes eternity; the holly with its little red berries reminds of Christ's crown of thorns with drops of blood; and the light of the candles is the light of Christ, with the large white candle symbolizing the birth of Christ and Christmas.

Someone at some point, probably a Hallmark subsidiary company trying to sell Advent candles, thought they'd give each of the candles certain meaning—one is the prophet's candle, the Bethlehem candle, the Shepherd's candle, and the angel's candle. I guess that's all well and good, if you like your liturgical practices reduced to a "Precious Moments" collectable.

The real meaning behind the candles is a more subtle and, I believe, meaningful. The purple candles are purple, of course, because the color of the season of Advent is Purple. Remember that Lent also is purple. And white is the color of Christmas. The seasons of Lent and Easter follow the same pattern. Lent, being a time of penitence and reflection is purple, with the great feast of Easter being white. Advent is meant to be a time very much like Lent; it is to be a time of reflection, preparation and waiting. In the ancient church, the emphasis was on the advent of the coming of Christ in the future. In modern times, the emphasis has focused on this being a time of preparation for the feast of Christmas and the celebration of the birth of the savior.

Now, I think I've explained everything about the Advent wreath, except one little detail, the pink candle. Why do we have a pink candle and why is it lit on the third Sunday of the Advent? To answer that question, one has to examine the tone of the lectionary passages during Advent. Typically, the passages are sober, serious, and sometimes even dire. But here on the third Sunday of Advent, we hear a hint of Christmas joy:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Because of the call to rejoice in this morning's lectionary pericope from the Apostle Paul, this Sunday became known as "Rejoice Sunday." The pink candle is pink, because the penitential and reflective tone of Advent shifts toward the joy of Christmas. If one takes a bit of the white of Christmas and mixes it with the purple of Advent, the color pink is born.

One fascinating thing about Paul's words to the church in Philippi is that Paul wrote these words while he was in chains. He wrote them under arrest and confinement.

Imagine, writing of joy from prison, or from a hospital bed, or beside the grave of a loved one, or as one faces one's own end.

In our culture, we tend to reduce joy to mere happiness. We then make our happiness contingent upon our circumstances. If things are going well, then we are happy. We assume that if we have the right stuff, the right amount of success, the right mix of personal and professional accomplishments, then we can manufacture our own happiness, and we can be truly joyful.

It's as if we have reduced life to a monopoly board. As Americans, we do tend to think of success in life in terms of a good game of monopoly. We tell ourselves that everybody has all the same opportunities. That everyone starts out equal and that the fun of life is to get ahead--to have more and better stuff than our neighbors, to live in the biggest, nicest house in town. Then, we will be happy.

Not one bit of that is true to life of course. We don't all start out at the same place. In a more perfect world, perhaps we'd all be born into nice homes, and we'd all possess equal measures of talent, drive, and intelligence, and society also would look upon us all as equal, but we don't live in such a world. What's more, success does not equal happiness and certainly not joy. Just look at the rich and famous. Are their lives happy? Often not.

Before this week, we could have pointed to someone like Tiger Woods. "Look, the world's greatest golfer. The first billion dollar athlete. Beautiful wife and children. Squeaky clean guy. Must be living a perfect life."

Life is not a game of Monopoly.

Now I love the game of monopoly. It's a great board game; one I've played most of my life. As a kid, I always bought up those stupid utilities, usually on the encouragement of my big sister, and I'd lose big time. Later in life, I learned what to buy and when to buy, and my skills improved greatly. But, one day, I realized how easy it is to steal from the bank. No one really guards the money. There's no safe, no night watchmen. It's just sitting there. Nothing like helping yourself to five or ten \$100 notes to really dominate the monopoly board.

All those years of losing at monopoly were gone. I was a Rockefeller, and everyone around me was headed to the poorhouse. After the initial rush of putting my opponents to shame wore off, the game suddenly wasn't much fun. I was winning, but only because I'd cheated my way to the top. I was the Bernie Madoff of Monopoly.

Because the game wasn't much fun anymore, because I was now super rich and all my friends and family were headed to the poorhouse, I suddenly shifted my strategy. I suppose I wanted to make amends for my cheating past, so I became the most magnanimous of generous of players, forgiving debts, giving away property, even cold hard cash, well monopoly money. It's funny how winning at the game through ill gotten means left me feeling hollow. It's funny how the game gave me real joy, when I was busy giving nearly everything away.

When Paul, from the prison cell, calls us to REJOICE, he calls us to experience the joy of knowing and serving Christ. He calls to be filled with something much greater than the fleeting happiness of pleasure and things and food and drink. He calls us to be filled with the peace of Christ, and to surrender all worry and all fretting to God in Christ.

Instead we so often attempt to fill our lives up with the emptiness of stuff and the fleeting pleasures of the moment. Imagine if instead, we found our contentment and happiness in our life with Christ. Imagine having profound joy no matter the circumstance, no matter the place in life in which we may find ourselves.

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