

3 Advent B
The Shorter Shortest Verse

December 17, 2023
1 Thessalonians 5:16

If you read the weekly newsletter this week, you already have an introduction to this sermon. You know about the shorter shortest verse. If you didn't read it, this will be brand new to you.

I grew up hearing that John 11:35, "Jesus wept," was the shortest verse in the Bible. You probably heard that, too. When we were asked to memorize Bible verses in Sunday school class, that was the first one picked. Luke 17:32, "Remember Lot's wife," was often the second one picked. It was also easy to remember.

It must have been about 40 years ago, when I was studying our Second Reading, that I realized that 1 Thessalonians 5:16, "Rejoice always," was a shorter shortest verse when reading it in Greek.

However, to determine the shortest verse, one must first decide how do you determine the shortest verse. Is it by the number of words? "Jesus wept" has two words, but so does "Rejoice always," and also "pray continually" that's also part of our lesson – at least they have two words in English. In the Greek of the New Testament, "Jesus wept," has three words – although one of those words has only one letter.

Do we determine the shortest verse by the number of letters. In English, "Jesus wept" contains 9 letters; "rejoice always" has 13 letters. "Jesus wept" is shorter by that measure. However, in Greek, the three words for "Jesus wept," have 16 letters. The two Greek words for "rejoice always," has 14 letters. "Rejoice always" is shorter by that measure. Determining the shortest verse in the Bible depends on your criteria: what language? Number of words? Number of letters?

Granted, knowing which verse is the shortest one in the Bible is not really important information to know. It's trivia – but some people, like me, like knowing trivial stuff. However, there are some important lessons to learn from this.

Many differences of opinions and heated arguments occur because the people use different criteria for determining what is right.

What is the shortest verse in the Bible? It depends on what criteria you use. There is more than one right answer. It can be, "Jesus wept." Or, using the original Greek words, it can be, "Rejoice always."

However, it really doesn't make a whole lot of difference if you know what the shortest verse in the Bible is, whether you answer "Jesus wept" or "rejoice always." The much more important question is: "What do these verses mean for your life?" "What do these verses do to you?"

These two verses present an interesting contrast in moods and emotions: Jesus wept – sadness, crying, tears; and rejoice always – happiness, smiles, laughter. It is a contrast that is very much a part of our lives.

There is much in the world to weep about. In John 11, Jesus weeps because his friend Lazarus has died. In the next verse, the people say, "See how much he loved him." Those tears came from Jesus' love for Lazarus.

Yesterday was Roy Finnie's memorial service. There was weeping during the service. Death brings sadness and separation to our lives. It is a time for weeping.

In Jesus' day there was suffering in the world – sickness, demon possessions, persecutions. The apostle Paul talks about his sufferings – imprisonment, beatings, name calling. There were reasons for weeping. He also says that his concern for his people causes him to shed tears.

There is suffering in the world today. The news is full of human suffering. Every day you hear about crimes committed in our cities and towns and around the world. There are wars in Ukraine and Gaza. There is fighting in African nations. Such conflicts brings pain and suffering and death to people.

The world is full of suffering. There are many good reasons for weeping. We still live in what Jesus called an adulterous and sinful generation.

That also leads to another short verse at the end of 1 Thessalonians: “pray without ceasing.” (These three words have 18 letters, but in Greek there are only two words, but they include 22 letters. Some more useless trivia.) This word for prayer usually refers to asking God to do something. Our prayers are not always praise and thanksgiving; they also include requests and pleas. Things are not right in our world and we ask God to do something about it.

Before the one healed Samaritan returned and gave thanks to God to Jesus, all ten lepers had been praying, “Jesus, Lord, have mercy on us.”¹ It was a plea for help.

When Paul had been in Thessalonica life wasn't all that pleasant. He was run out of town by some angry Jews. They even followed him to the next town where he had to escape again.

When crowds were seeking Paul's life, frankly, I don't think he was rejoicing, but praying continually – asking God to protect him. Asking God to transform those enemies.

When Jesus was facing the cross, his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane were not prayers of thanksgiving and rejoicing; but intense requests that he might not have to go through this suffering.

When people are diagnosed with cancer, they don't rejoice, they pray; and sometimes weep. When we see friends addicted on drugs or afflicted with mental illness; we don't rejoice, we pray, and sometimes weep. When we watch the evil reported on the news, we don't rejoice, we pray, and sometimes weep.

In fact, Paul tells us in Romans: “Rejoice with those who are rejoicing; weep with those who are weeping.”² Our lives – and the lives of our friends are not always full of joy. There are also tears. We are to share in both.

What is this joy he is talking about when he says, “rejoice always”? I don't think that it is the absence of tears or of weeping. I'm sure that Jesus had this joy, but we also know that he wept.

What is this joy? A quote I heard many years ago and I don't know who first said it goes: “The opposite of joy is not sorrow, but unbelief.” I told that to another student my first year at seminary. His question was, “How do you define joy?” There's that question of what criteria does one use.

The quick answer that came to me then, and that I've used since then is, “Joy is the calm assurance that God is in charge.” It is faith. It is trusting God – knowing that God will do what is right even though it may not seem like it right now. We may not always agree or understand what is best or right – often because we don't use the same criteria that God uses. Our faith tells us

¹ Luke 17:13

² Romans 12:15

that God always knows what God is doing, even when we can't understand it. God will do what is best. That gives us reason to rejoice – even when weeping or crying out in prayers for mercy and help to God.

This joy is not so much an emotion, but an attitude that trusts God in the midst of all circumstance. This joy does not come so much from inside ourselves, but from believing the promises of God.

There are two very short verses in the Bible. Both are meaningful for lives today. Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. In the same way, you should love others so much that you weep when they suffer – you share their pain. We weep with those who weep.

At the same time there is Paul's command, "Rejoice always. You should love and trust God so much that you can rejoice in the midst of your weeping. There is a resurrection at the end of death. There is always the presence of God in our lives – in the good and bad times. One day there will be a new life – a new heaven and a new earth – where there is no suffering. God has said it. Trust God to do it. In that you can rejoice today and at all times. We have the calm assurance that God is in control.