

November 5, 2006

JOY II

Matthew 11:19 and Philippians 4:4-9

Last week we looked at that passage in Matthew that reads, *“Then the Son of Man came enjoying life ...”* It appears that Jesus found joy in every facet of life. He found joy in the nature that surrounded him, enjoyed the clothes he wore, the people with whom he came in contact be they good, bad or indifferent, the little children, the table, close friends and his relationship with his heavenly father. Jesus found joy in doing good.

We Christians talk about, or we used to, eternity. What a place, no worries, no pain, no tears, wrapped up in goodness. Here we talk about the joy in the life to come. When Jesus walked among us he found joy in the life that he lived right now. What a wonderful blessing if we, following in the footsteps of Jesus, could live a life of joy in the moment that is the present.

I think of all people St. Paul best understood the message that Christ brings to us. The words of Christ seem to come alive in the life of Paul. We do well to pay attention to his advice as we try to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Writing to the congregation that made up the church at Philippi, Paul tells them to ***“Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice!”*** These words came from an old man, broken in body, distressed in spirit, sitting in a Roman jail expecting a visit from the executioner at any time, lonely, separated from friends. Here we find an abundance of all those things that would depress and oppress the spirit. Listen to what this sick, lonely old man had to say for the living of our life:

- 4 ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!***
- 5 ***Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.***
- 6 ***Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.***
- 7 ***And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***

- 8 *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*
- 9 *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”* *Php. 4:4-9 (NIV)*

Despite all of Paul’s bitter experiences Paul’s faith in Christ filled him with a feeling of joy. When the dark days of life seem to take over Paul suggests that we renew our faith and trust in God. God still is! Sometimes we feel that God is so far away, so far away that he does not hear our cry and is not doing anything about it. Our faith grows weak. The fact is that God is doing something about it though in our human limitation we cannot see it, cannot understand it. In this hour we do well to listen to Paul when he tells us, *“Never doubt the nearness of God.”*

We are in a hurry. We live in a rush, rush world. We want instant answers, instant gratification. We forget that many of the best things of life have to wait.

After World War I Great Britain drew some lines on a map and created the country of Iraq. Within the boundaries formed by those lines was a hodgepodge of nations, tribes, people and religious groups. In time the only thing that held these people together was a ruthless strong man backed by guns and torture. The U.S. stepped in and toppled the strong man. Having done so we expect that the people will automatically come together as one harmonious country. It may happen, but it will take time as one group tries to overcome the other using the only standard they have ever known, fear and killing. So much of the better things of life take time to develop. In the hurry of our brief human life we must be careful not to become so hurried that we lose our patience, patience in religion, patience in God, patience with our governments, patience with each other.

Paul tells us that it helps to keep a note of joy alive if we are to control our anxieties. We cannot live without anxiety. As we travel along life's way we will be anxious about many

things. Right now the number one anxiety is our health.

While it is impossible to live without anxieties the point is we must master our anxieties lest they master us.

Paul was able to rise above his anxieties by a belief that God was with him. That when he got to the point where he couldn't do for himself God would be there. God would be there to help. The long term truth is that God will see us through. God will see to it that we have the inner resources to meet trouble when it comes and see it through. Leigh Hunt gives us a clue as how to turn the faith exhibited by Paul into a faith that passes all understanding. *"Whenever evil befalls us, we ought to ask ourselves, after the first suffering, how can we turn it into good? So shall we take occasion, from our bitter root, to raise perhaps many flowers."*

Our mind has unbelievable power. If we are to live a life of joy we must fill that mind with the highest, brightest and best thoughts. Paul saw that when he said, *"Think on these things, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are*

lovely, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things of good report ...”

William Lyon Phelps, one of Yale’s most popular professors of yesterday when a Yale professor was something, was asked to write a message out of the fullness of his life to help others achieve the happiness and contentment that his life demonstrated. Thinking back Phelps realized that there was one sentence out of an address to his senior class that had been an integral part of his life over the years, *“The happiest person is the person who thinks the most interesting thoughts.”* He went on to explain:

“Real happiness is not dependent on external things. The pond is fed from within. The kind of happiness that stays with you is the happiness that springs from inward thoughts and emotions. You must think of this now, while you are young. You must cultivate your mind if you wish to achieve enduring happiness. You must furnish your mind with interesting thoughts and ideas. For an empty mind grows bored and cannot endure itself. An empty mind seeks pleasure as a substitute for happiness.”

In her commentary on Phelps’ message Lillian Watson

writes:

“If the happiest person is the person who thinks the most interesting thoughts we are bound to grow happier as we advance in years, because our minds have more and more interesting thoughts. A well-ordered life is like climbing a tower; the view halfway up is better than the view from the base, and it steadily becomes finer as the horizon expands.”

We can control our thoughts. When the bad news of the world tends to get us down, when campaign ads have us think that all who seek office are a bunch of scallywags, when we see the troubles with which others are faced it is time to put our thoughts on the things that are pure, high and noble. Our minds cannot be a vacuum. We have to fill them with something. That something should be the joy of living. Seems fitting that on the night of Jesus' birth the angels sang, *“Joy to the World.”* As Paul discovered Christ can be a joy to our world.

Each of us serves as an example. We do well to observe and follow the examples of the best people we have ever

known. We know, or have known, people who seem to live above the fray. Who seem to live a life of joy. We do well to follow their example. We are not restricted to those we know personally. Through books we can visit with those examples over the ages. Sydney Dark says, *“The men who have gone before us have taught us how to live and how to die. We are the heirs of ages.”*

St. Paul is an example of those we should follow but he is not the only example. The books are full of the great personalities that show us how to live. In the city of Rome where Paul penned his letter to the Philippians there once lived Lucius Seneca, the greatest of the stoic philosophers. Nearsighted from childhood he read from the books in the libraries of Rome through a glass of water. Despite this frustrating limitation he became a poet, a dramatist, an orator, a statesman as well as a philosopher. The times in which Seneca lived were turbulent and exciting. His was a time rich in hope and promise. But like today it was also a time of

moral laxity, of political corruption, of cruelty and greed. Born near the end of the fourth century B.C. he developed a philosophy in which we in our troubled age can still find comfort, *“Do the best you can ... enjoy the present ... rest satisfied with what you have.”*

Seneca tells us:

“True happiness is to understand our duties toward God and man; to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future; not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears, but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is abundantly sufficient; for he that is so wants nothing. The great blessings of mankind are within us, and within our reach; but we shut our eyes and, like people in the dark, fall foul of the very thing we search for without finding it. Tranquility is certain equality of mind which no condition of fortune can either exalt or depress.”

The Son of man came enjoying life. To follow in Christ's footsteps we are to keep joy in our heart, believe in God and God's character, cultivate a spirit of forbearance and cheerfulness, control our anxieties, fill the mind with thoughts of the best, follow the examples of good men and women both the living and the dead. A spirit of joy can prevail over the

sadness that seeks to darken our spirit in order that we too can
live a life of joy.

Pastor's Message

It has been observed that even caretakers and those who perform the most menial services over long periods of time around great buildings unconsciously acquire an air of dignity and stateliness commensurate with the structure they have so long served.

Every man in maturity and old age is the projection of the things he has thought most about, the feelings he has enjoyed most and the people he has loved most to be with.

Few men are endowed with the extraordinary gifts to produce greatness on their own. But, all men have the privilege of attaining some degree of greatness through association with what is really great.

A young man or woman of limited personal capacity who sets out early in life and who perseveres over thirty to fifty years of familiarizing himself or herself with the best which has been thought in the past cannot fail to grow into some degree of greatness in old age. The same result comes from cultivation of noble feelings and association with people of excellence.

The fulfillment of the ultimate possibilities of human personality are wrought in the individual who, over a long life, keeps before himself the gentleness, the kindness, the compassion, and the loveliness of Christ.

Every man at last is the sum of what he has thought about, the feelings he has let have sway within him and the people he has loved most.

PRAYER

O God, though I can never be great with extraordinary deeds accomplished with unusual talents, lead me into a greatness within through association with great thoughts, noble feelings, high purposes, and fellowship with the best people I can know. Amen.