

October 29, 2006

JOY

Matthew 11:19 (Phillips Translation)

The other day I read where some had voiced concerns over Homewood putting up Christmas decorations before Halloween. Pretty soon folks will be complaining that Christmas has become too commercial, that we have taken Christ out of Christmas. But then some people say we should cry at a birth and rejoice at a funeral. I don't think it was meant to be that way. The emotion of Christmas, of life, is really one of joy.

Inside of us there are two personalities, one of the darkness of doubt, the other of the light of life. Whether we live in the shadow of doom or in the light of joy depends on which personality is to prevail in our life.

We read that John the Baptist came out of the wilderness dressed in animal skins and preaching a life of austerity. In J. B. Phillips' translation of the Bible Matthew says "*Then the*

Son of man came enjoying life and people say, 'Look, a drunkard and a glutton ...'”

By his life, what he did, and what he said, Jesus shows us that life is something special. That we are to treat it as something special. That we are to live it with a full appreciation of its possibilities as it now is. If Christianity doesn't bring us to an enjoyment of life then I have missed the understanding of the more abundant life.

Saturday morning the sun blazed out of a powder blue sky. The tree across the street had turned into a yellow flame. The birds were carrying on as if it were spring. The squirrels chased one another from branch to branch on a tree busy shedding its leaves. Other than the falling leaves there was nothing going on in the nature around me to indicate that in a few short days, or weeks at the most, the ground would be covered with a plant killing frost and the sky would turn to gloom and doom. These simple animals in the yard were busy enjoying the day that was.

Turning the Gospel over in my mind I can't recall Jesus living or teaching the negative. The Law of Moses and its annotations is full of "*Thou shalt not.*" Jesus didn't give us a list of forbidden foods. It doesn't tell us what we are not to wear. He doesn't tell us to wear a plaque on our forehead or on our doorpost to proclaim that we are Christians. Other than we are to love God and love his children, Jesus didn't give us a list of dos and don'ts.

I don't recall Jesus having much to say to the outer man other than we are to act special because we are special. The message that comes from the life of Jesus is a message directed to the man inside, the heart, the soul. That message is a positive message, a message of joy.

Maybe it was the contrast between a gloomy, rainy Friday and a brilliant, sunny Saturday that leaves me impressed by the pleasure that Jesus found in the physical world. He looked at the physical world around him and his heart seems to explode like a four year old on Christmas morning. "*Consider the*

lilies, how they grow. Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Time after time the Gospel writers tell us of Jesus sitting down at the table with a group from here or there. When the physical appetites of those who joined him at the table were satisfied, his words sought to speak to the hunger of the man inside.

Jesus wore a seamless robe. That must have been something special, so special that the soldiers that crucified him cast lots for it rather than cut it.

Jesus enjoyed associating with people. Good people, bad people, sick people, it didn't seem to make any difference. His enemy said he sought out the company of tax gatherers, the unclean who were shunned by the organized church. We read of his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Never mind if she was one of that group of people despised by the Jews. Never mind that her reputation was such that the righteous would turn away if they passed her on the street.

Jesus enjoyed her company just as she was.

“Suffer the little children; these belong to the Kingdom of God.” In the midst of serious teachings directed to the adults that had come to hear him, Jesus took pleasure at the little children as they sought to divert his attention their way.

Jesus found pleasure in talking to the most learned of the day, especially when they sought to trap him with trick questions. Never mind that they did not see things as Jesus saw them, never mind that their minds were closed to what Jesus had to say. He found joy in talking to them wherever he found them.

That Jesus took delight in fraternizing with all comers is not to minimize the special joy he found in association with a few close friends. Out of the Twelve, James, Peter and John were closest to him. Seems like when Jesus had his greatest need he took these three to share his experiences.

Then there was the family of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. His time with this family must have been special. They lived

in a little town just out side of Jerusalem. It is of note that during the last days before his passion Jesus did not spend the night in Jerusalem. With the coming of night Jesus retired to the closeness and warmth of this little family circle of friends.

What a joy to have at least one close friend with whom we can share the ups and downs of life, to laugh with and, yes to cry with. A person is lucky to have a few friends with whom he can share one's life.

They say that the simplest biography of Jesus was, "*He went about doing good.*" I guess that is the highest praise you can bestow on anyone. Time and time again Dr. Pinkerd used to say that a person reached the highest level of life if he or she could warrant the eulogy that he or she was a good woman or a good man. Getting down to it I suspect we would find that is what life is all about.

Most of the miracles performed by Jesus were those of healing. His greatest works were healing broken bodies and ministering to disturbed minds. Jesus found joy in doing good

by helping those who came to him in need. What a lesson to us today. We've talked about Miss Caroline in Arthur Gordon's writings. She discovered the secret, "*Find something that needs to be done and do it.*"

Feel down in the dumps, tired, life passing you by? Try the Jesus joy treatment. Go out and do a little something helpful for someone who needs help. Looking for joy, that is where you will find it. Amazing thing is how it grows like the mustard seed. A little help here, a little more there, and its passes from people to people, from age to age. After over 2,000 years we, as a people, are still finding joy in ministering to broken bodies and disturbed minds. Oh it takes effort, disciple and sharing but what a return.

Jesus found joy in his relation with his heavenly father. John of Revelation paints vivid word pictures of God and of heaven. Jesus didn't. In reading the Gospels we find a Jesus who believed in a heavenly father who was always present, who knows about us, and that we can depend on his love,

mercy and goodness. Jesus found joy in living life and facing death with this belief.

We make a mistake when we attempt to dehumanize Jesus. Jesus lived the same life we are called on to live. Only in him can we understand ourselves. Only in him can we know the mystery of life, its frustrations, its sufferings and more important, its joy.

Jesus found joy in the here and now. He tells us that we are not to be anxious about tomorrow for there is enough that needs our attention today. Too often in our hustle and bustle we miss the joy of the here and now. We worry about early Christmas decorations, about the world's concentration on the material aspects of Christmas neglecting the joy of the moment.

It all reminds me of an event out of the life of Arthur Gordon. Gordon was deep in the dumps. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't produce. Succumbing to the inevitable he dropped his work to go fishing hoping to renew his brain

power. On the way to his boat he met an acquaintance, a seventy year old retired rabbi who was walking his dog. Cutting through the conversation between the two Gordon reluctantly invited the rabbi to join him on his fishing journey. The rabbi accepted.

They got in the boat. They cleared the bay and hit the open water of the ocean in an explosion of spray. Worried about his passenger Gordon heard, over the roar of the motor, *“Marvelous!”*

They reached a sandbar that would disappear at high tide. The rabbi looked down at the pattern the sea had made when the sea covered the bar. *“Marvelous”* he said *“the footprints of the sea.”*

Gordon baited the hook for his neophyte friend, gave him some instructions on bait casting, made the first cast for him and then the rabbi was on his own.

After making a timid cast or two the rabbi came to Gordon with his head down carrying the mother of all

backlashes. The two swapped rods so Gordon could make the necessary repair. Bam, a big bass hit the line now in the hands of the rabbi. The fish took off with the rabbi holding on for dear life as he tried to back peddle through the shallow water onto the bar. The fish turned and headed towards the bar. Leaning back against 20 pounds of pull the rabbi did just as one would expect. He fell backward and in so doing dropped the rod. Scrambling around in the surf he found it and held it aloft. Miraculously the fish was still on. Back and forth in slowly decreasing arcs the fish was pulled closer and closer to the bar. Still full of fight the great bass came in on the shoulders of a wave. In his excitement the rabbi let the rod tip down until it was pointed directly at the fish. Before Gordon could give a warning the fish slammed his tail against the sand and was gone. The rabbi came up beside Gordon, soaked, bedraggled, trembling but there was no defeat in his eyes, no disappointment. *“Marvelous, marvelous!”* All of which brings me to the concluding lines of Gordon’s story which in a

kind of way sums up today's lesson.

I watched him go up the path toward the dunes in a kind of secret joy and I think I knew what the secret was. This man didn't concern himself with looking forward or back. He didn't regret the past or flinch from the future. He lived in the present, the actual graspable moment of existence, the only point where true contact with reality is possible. I thought of that other rabbi who said, "*Take therefore no thoughts for tomorrow.*"

The joy of here and now a joy we find in the life and teachings of Jesus. I guess this puts the ball in our court.

Pastor's Message

No amount of repetition can over-emphasize the importance of today in our experience. Most of the regrets of old age are concerning things one intended to do but never got around to doing. If age could speak one sentence summing up the wisdom of the experience of the years it would probably be: "Enjoy life and living today."

Thomas Dreier has written: "If we are ever to enjoy life, now is the time — not tomorrow, nor next year, nor in some future life after we have died. The best preparation for a better life next year is a full, complete, harmonious, joyous life this year. Our beliefs in a rich future life are of little importance unless we coin them into a rich present life. Today should always be our most wonderful day."

"A man will never be able to get away from himself and the kind of person he is in either time or eternity. Omar Khayyam expressed it thus:

"I sent my soul through the invisible,
Some letter of the after-life to spell:
And by and by my soul return'd to me,
And answer'd 'I myself am heav'n and hell'."

It is wisdom to live and act each day with a minimum of regret. This is the basis of a blessed life both now and hereafter.

PRAYER

Help me to remember, O God, that today is a part of my eternity. May I make the most of each of them. Amen.

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