Sunday, September 27, 1981
THE JOY OF GENEROSITY
Philippians 4:10-20

A description of the kind of joy and contentment which the Christian life can bring is found in St. Paul's "thank you" note to the Philippians, for their generosity. Listen to Paul's words, "for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

Isn't this kind of attitude toward life we all ultimately seek? In whatever condition we find ourselves, to be as free from hurry and worry as possible; to have a Holy Center which holds us together and gives ultimate meaning to our lives.

But most of us, unlike St. Paul, have a sense of drift and in the midst of the drift, we feel driven. Our lives lack a sense of direction. The feeling of being lost and at loose ends is characteristic of many people I meet. At the same time, we are very busy. In fact, we are almost always aware of being behind schedule. We have a nagging sense that there are unfinished tasks, unfulfilled promises, unrealized goals.

There is always something we should have said or done. Thus, we find it difficult just to stop and relax. We always feel we have to be doing something.

Furthermore, in our society, being always busy is a kind of status symbol. We are expected to be busy and have many things on our minds. Our friends say to us, "I guess you are busy as usual," and mean it as a compliment. If we were to reply — "No, I'm not busy at all," they would think we were shirking our responsibilities.

Henri Nouwen reminds us that we are not only occupied, busy, but also pre-occupied. To be pre-occupied means to fill our time and place long before we are there. We fill our lives with "what ifs." We say to ourselves, "What if I get fired?" "What if my child is not home on time?" "What if a war starts?" "What if the world comes to an end?" What if I run out of money? "These anxious thoughts fill our minds and add to our sense of drift and of being driven.

Our lives are filled, yet unfilled. While our minds and spirits are filled with many worries and things to be done, and we wonder how we can live up to the expectations imposed upon us by ourselves and others, we at the same time also have a deep sense of unfulfillment, emptiness. While we are busy with many things, we wonder if what we do makes any real difference. While we are running from one event to the next, we wonder in our innermost selves if anything is actually happening?

Our Christian faith does not suggest that we should not be busy and have many things on our mind. Jesus Christ does not try to pull us away from the many events, activities, and people which make up our lives. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul were as busy as anyone. Our Christian faith does not tell us that we do is unimportant. Rather, our faith asks us to shift the center of our attention and not become too attached to the things of the world and what we are doing. We are to take what we do seriously, but not too seriously. We are to be attached, but yet detached. Only then can we come to experience the joy of generosity.

And that's exactly what happened to St. Paul. "He learned in whatever state he was to be content — he learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want," and beneath it all he had an abiding joy.

How then do we attain the same kind of joy and contentment in our lives?

1. First as just mentioned, we need to have both attachment and detachment. "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." We are driven in this life by the necessity to acquire things to live with, but at the same time, we know deep down that our real life does not consist of the things we need.

The point is we cannot be generous, giving, joyful people if we are too attached to the things of the world. Then we try only to hold onto what we have. We lose the capacity to "let go."

On the other hand, if we can have a sense of detachment, then while we are content with whatever comes our way, we can also find special satisfaction in the generosity of others.

What the Philippians discovered and what Paul knew, you and I can also experience the fact that the most joyous people in the world, the most content, the most relaxed, the least worried, are those who are generous and who at the same time know how to receive graciously, the generosity of others. But we cannot be generous if we are also too attached to what we have — then we are not able to give freely and lovingly.

To put it another way, some people never grow up. During the first years of our lives, we are completely on the receiving end, and we are completely concerned with ourselves and our self-gratification. A little later on we begin to conform to the rules of the group, not necessarily because we agree with them, but because we yield to social pressure. If we continue to grow and mature, we reach an even higher level of development in which we find joy in giving, not because we have to give, but because we want to give. At this stage, we want to give more than we like to take. We want to leave the world a better place than we found it. We care! We give!

But some people never grow up. They never reach this stage--they remain takers and do not become givers. They are the ones who continue to worry all the time that they will not have enough. They are the ones who are not only occupied, but pre-occupied. They are so attached to what they have that they act as if they can take it with them. But if we continue to hold onto things too tightly, we will never experience the joy of generosity. In this state when we do give, we do so under pressure and do so grudgingly. We are never then a cheerful giver.

In other words, the joy of giving, the joy of generosity can only be experienced when we give openly and freely. If we are so busy taking good care of our own needs because we are sure we do not have enough, then what we have left to give is what we have left over and that won't be very much. Attachment and detachment.

2. Secondly, to experience the joy of generosity, we need to give for the right reasons. I say this because there are times when we give, b.t we give for the wrong reasons.

I'm told that there used to be a tribe of Indians who lived in the Pacific Northwest. These Indians would ruin their enemies by giving them gifts that would of course later have to be returned with interest. If Joe Indian were mad at Mike Indian, for example, he would invite Mike and the rest of the tribe to a "giving ceremony" called a "potlatch."

At the potlatch, Joe might give Mike a new canoe, lots of warm blankets and the latest in fishing spears. All the while there would be lots of speeches and plenty of good food. The hidden purpose of the potlatch was to embarrass Mike who would be feverishly thinking about where he could ever find the resources to return such lavish gifts. And so, the game of “can you top this?” would enter another round.

It’s difficult if not impossible to experience the “joy of generosity” if one gives for the wrong reasons. There are guilt gifts, the gift that the giver really wants — a father gives his one-year-old child a fancy electric train: there are gifts that are bribes; gifts that show how powerful we are — one father, when his son turned 16, and was able to get a driver’s license, gave him a new Mercedes Benz. Left with a feeling of inadequacy because of his own childhood encounter with poverty, this father needed to give his son not transportation, but a status symbol. The boy would’ve preferred a car that didn’t cause catcalls in the parking lot of the local high school.

And there are hate gifts — I knew a woman who was married to a man who had severe diabetes and had been placed on a very restricted diet. Sometimes at a big party, she brought her husband a piece of cake or a particularly rich desert. “This won’t hurt you, dear,” she would say, but her actions were calculated to make her husband sick. I would be suspicious of a person who gave me cigarettes.

Giving for the right reason means simply giving out of love. It means taking a risk because a true gift is given with no thought of return — then one really becomes a cheerful giver: Giving generous people are by nature cheerful, joyous people. If you cannot give cheerfully, it means you are not giving enough.

Or if every time you begin to give you wonder — what’s going to be my return? What’s going to come back to me? Then it’s not actually a gift, but an investment. And there’s nothing wrong with being an investor. But we need to be givers as well. And there’s a difference between the two.

The Philippian Christians who gave so joyfully and generously to Paul gave simply out of love — there was no other motivation.

3. Thirdly to experience the joy of generosity we need to know how to graciously receive gifts as well as being able to lovingly give them. in so doing, St. Paul gave the· Philippians the gift of letting others give to him.

Again, this is not as simple as it may sound. Some people, isolated and superior, live in a tower of pride. They are often very comfortable when giving to others, but they cannot tolerate a situation in which others given to them. Because they falsely associate giving with inferiority vs. superiority, some people simply refuse to let others give to them.

Some years ago, I knew of a physician who was one of the most respected members of the medical community. Other physicians, if they encountered a particularly difficult case, would send their patients to this man for consultation.

One day, one of the other doctors in the hospital commented, with some hesitation, that he didn’t look too well. The first doctor acknowledged that he hadn’t been feeling well. The second doctor suggested that he would welcome the opportunity to be of whatever help he could be to

the man. “Thank you for your interest,” replied the first doctor in a rather brusque manner, “but I’m the senior man on this staff and I can look after myself.” Several months later, he died of an illness which if it had been treated in time could’ve been cured.

So used to giving, this man could not accept the thought of receiving. He could not experience the joy of generosity. St. Paul had learned the secret of contentment in his own life, and he now found special satisfaction in the generosity of his Philippian friend. That too can be our experience.

It’s in the nature of creation that we can experience the joy of generosity because God is a self-giving loving God. Thus, when we give and receive joyfully, we are in tune with God’s Spirit. That’s why the most joyful, content, happy, cheerful people I know are generous giving people. We too, can be like them and like St. Paul and we will be able to say — “For I have learned in whatever state I am to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me.” Amen.