Sunday, December 13, 1981
THE GIFT OF FUN
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

There are many people who approach Christmas with appre-hension rather than anticipation, with fear instead of joy. For some it is a sad and lonely time. Probably more people become depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. Too much drinking, too little sleep, frayed nerves, exhausting schedules all combine to take away the fun that could be evident during this season.

Some people are sad because the holidays remind them of all the people gone from them: dead parents, lost friends, and our own lost better selves of earlier Christmases.

Preparations for the holiday are so laborious and so ex-pensive that usually happy people are sometimes reduced to muttering cranks. The suicide rate goes up in Decem-ber, and it is related to the ambivalent feelings many individuals have about the Christmas season and what it should mean to them.

For many adults there is the reality that Christmas can never be Christmas again as it was for them as children. So, there is a lot of regretting done at this time of year. There are attempts by parents to recapture the old feelings .by spending enormous amounts of money on their children's gifts, and this vicarious device works pretty well, but just pretty well. Threading itself through every emotion is the problem of money — not that there may necessarily be an insufficient amount to handle Christmas bills, but however much there is too often becomes a measuring stick of one's inner sense of worth.

Money also gets involved in one's estimate of others. We suggest our regard for friends and relatives by buying them gifts and every gift requires a decision about price. We would like to get grandmother a coat, but we settle for a sweater. Gift decisions and money decisions add up to tensions.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts many individuals during this season. This is rooted partly C in the misguided notion that everybody else is hysterically happy as Christmas approaches and by comparison we don't feel as happy, and we wonder why. Is there something wrong with us?

Maybe we misunderstand the Christmas message. The story of Advent and Christmas have never told us that life has no problems — that there is no darkness in the world. I know of someone who sent out a Christmas card with a quote from St. Augustine, a quote that found the pattern of the cross in the nailed wooden sticks of the infant's crib. Some people told him it was in poor taste, since it mentioned suffering during the season of Christmas.

There is nothing in the Christmas narrative to make us turn the manger into a Disneyland scene. The Gospels tell us of a young couple who had to flee to Egypt soon after the baby was born, and of all little boy babies being killed in that region of Bethlel1em and beyond.

Christmas is also the story of the birth of a baby who was the Savior of the world, yet who as a young man was crucified. But it is also the story of that same in- individual being resurrected — meaning that God's love for all of us can never be killed or done away with in any manner. That love which became flesh in Jesus at Bethle-hem can never be extinguished.

Thus, it is no accident that when the stories about Jesus' accident birth took form in the early church, they emphasized the fact that it was night when he was born — the world was in darkness — but at the same time the Christmas narratives emphasize that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

Even today, that light still shines, and the darkness cannot put it out. So, no matter how dark the world is, no matter how dark the problems in your personal life, the story of Christmas is that the light still shines. Even more im-portant, this light does not avoid darkness, it does not gloss over problems; it shines in the darkness and through it. The light overcomes, overpowers the darkness.

So, as we approach this Christmas, in spite of our problems, personal and worldwide, in spite of our depressed moods and our worries about money and gifts, I want to suggest that we give ourselves and others a most-unique and special gift and one needed by all of us — the gift of fun. And we who are Christians are the ones who have the gift to give because we know that the light still shines in the darkness and the darkness will never put it out. So, we can have fun and give fun and receive fun.

Now the gift of fun is especially needed because there are always people around us who work at destroying the happiness, fun, and joy that is present. These are the people who find the flaw and point it out in every situation and in so doing often ruin the fun for others.

A few weeks ago, I heard a true story of such a situation. A young woman who was having trouble with feelings of depression told me that she remembers that as a child her ·home was a rather gloomy place and there was very little time for fun and enjoyment. Everything was always serious and dour. At breakfast one morning, for example, her brothers told her a funny story, and she began to laugh. Her mother, finishing her cup of coffee, admonished her by saying, "You know what they say, if you laugh before seven, you'll cry before eleven."

When this young woman grew up and had a home of her own, she found herself becoming overly serious and humorless. She could not give the gift of fun and had difficulty in receiving it from others. But she kept working at it and began to make some real progress.

Feeling more alive and free, she decided one day that it would be a beautiful thing to give her parents a surprise dinner party in honor of their wedding anniversary. She worked for many days to arrange the party for her parents. She carefully arranged the guest list, cleaned her house, and prepared a lovely meal. The party was a success. All the guests had a wonderful time. After the party was over, the young woman's father thanked his daughter for the wonderful party and his eyes sparkled with pleasure as he spoke. Finally, her mother said, "You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble, dear. It was very nice of you to try. The roast beef was a little well done." And all the fun began to fade away.

This Christmas season, be a good receiver and giver of the gift of fun. So many people need this gift in their lives.

Remember having fun and giving and receiving this gift does not mean that we do not take life seriously. Fun is to be a part of life; it is built into the creation by God. Children naturally have fun until some adult puts a damper on it.

What I remember most about the Advent and Christmas season as I was growing up is the pure, unadulterated fun we had as a family during this time of year. And most of the fun came not from the gifts we received but from the pure joy of being with each other and from the games we played to-gether — cousins, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. We received from our parents in particular, the gift of fun, which means they took time out to play games with us.

But that's difficult for some adults to do. For many years now, psychologists have known about a condition called — "Sunday depression." People who have Sunday depression usually feel fine so long as they are working. As soon as there's no work they have to do, they start feeling tense, depressed, get headaches, and are generally uncomfortable.

I once knew a man who had a classic case of Sunday depres-sion. During the week when he was working as an accountant, he felt fine. On Sundays and holidays, however, he felt awful. When he went back to work again on Monday morning, he again started to feel better again. As I got to know this man, I learned more about the reasons for his Sunday depression.

When he was a child, his parents owned a small newspaper and candy store. In order to make even a small profit, his man's parents had to open the store at six in the morning and didn't close until nine at night. Whenever he saw his parents, they were working.

And so, this man never learned how to play and have fun. After a time, he came to realize that this parent's circumstances were quite different from his own and that he needn't feel guilty if he had some free time. After a time, this man learned to receive and to give the gift of fun with his children and with others.

A few years ago, I was in an airport in Florida. Most of the people there were families who were coming back from vacation. An announcement was made that the plane had some mechanical problems and would be delayed in departure for at least two hours. A loud moan arose from the passengers in the lounge. A half hour later I took a walk around the waiting area to see what people were doing.

One set of parents had borrowed a deck of cards from the airline, and they were having fun teaching some new games to their children. I saw a mother reading a book to her daughter and they were having lots of fun. One father was yelling at his children and saying that he would never take them anywhere again.

It can be so easy and so delightful to give the gift of fun. It's a gift we can give to both children and adults. As I read the New Testament stories, I'm certain that Jesus Christ knew how to give and receive the gift of fun.

In a recent study, children were asked what they liked about their grandparents. Very young children liked grand-parents who gave them material things. But by the time the children were eight or nine, getting things was no longer so important. These children preferred grandparents who became mutually involved in activities, particularly in the playing of games - they preferred grandparents who gave the gift of fun.

There's a theological dimension to fun, because fun is often associated with play. Playful elements which involve having fun are found in just about any culture. In fact, some theologians argue that culture as such would be impossible without this dimension.

The intention of play is joy and when this intention is realized, we have an experience which transcends our every-day world. In the period of joyful play, we step from time into eternity. When adults play with genuine joy and fun, we momentarily regain the deathlessness of childhood. This can happen even in the face of acute suffering and eying.

In other words, having fun is to experience the love of God in a unique way. It is a signal of transcendence. Children seem to know this intuitively.

The Christmas season is in particular a time to have fun and to give the gift of fun to others, because we have some time off from our usual round of duties. I hope those of you who are parents of children who are still at home will give them the gift of fun in particular.

I like the fun which children naturally have at this time of year. This week I read a limerick written by an 11-year-old child. It goes:

There was a young lady named White,
Who sang carols with all of her might
She would ring someone's bell
And warble Noel
Till they begged her to sing Silent Night.

Have some fun! Amen.