Sunday, May 15, 1988
SCHADENFREUDLICHKEIT
I Corinthians 13:4-7; James 4:11-12; Romans 12:15-21

Sometimes it takes a word from another language to get our attention. That's what happened to me with the German word which is our sermon title for today—"Schadenfreudlichkeit." I came across this word last fall in a column written by Dr. Martin E. Marty in the Christian Century magazine. Dr. Marty gave this translation for the word: "The enjoyable sin of enjoying others' misfortunes — Schadenfreudlichkeit."

He confessed that he was not immune from this sin, as are none of us. Martin Marty found himself especially enjoying the misfortune of a California couple who had lost $30,000 to $50,000 on a doll they advertised but never produced. Intending to exploit the minute-and-a-half-long passion called Olliemania, they promoted a Barbie-sized doll representing Colonel Oliver North. They expected a half-million orders and millions in profits. After several months, they found 32 takers — not enough to warrant production. People preferred the classics themselves, Ken and Barbie.

Schadenfreudlichkeit — the enjoyable sin of enjoying others' misfortunes. Each one of you listening knows exactly what I'm talking about. And we find ourselves rejoicing not only at the misfortune of our enemies but also secretly enjoying the misfortunes of our friends. It says something about the hidden hostility in the ground of our souls. Paul Tillich, quoting Immanuel Kant, put it this way—"There is something in the misfortune of our best friends which does not displease us."

It's not surprising that St. Paul, in writing to the Church at Corinth, when describing Christian love, reminded his readers that "love does not rejoice in iniquity." Or we could translate, "love does not find satisfaction in the misfortune of others — enemies or friends."

We know the feeling. We often do rejoice at wrong or misfortune, or when someone else stumbles. Oh, it's not loud boisterous rejoicing, but rather the kind that's more quiet and inward, a secret smile, an appetite for juicy gossip, a strange kind of satisfaction when we hear about someone else doing wrong or getting caught.

But isn't it strange that we could be happy that sometimes evil gets its way with a person, that good is defeated, that someone has given way to temptation, or that trouble has come into someone's life? We especially seem to get a feeling of satisfaction when a famous person stumbles.

There are newspapers and magazines sold in grocery stores, and in other stores as well, usually placed prominently by the check-out counter so we can at least read the inviting headlines while we are waiting in line. Most of the stories in these publications are about famous people and the trouble that has come into their lives.

As research for this sermon, the other day I went into a local store to read the headlines on some of these publications which specialize in telling us of the dirt in celebrities' lives.

Here are a few samples: "The Dark Secrets Lana Turner's Daughter Kept From Her Mother." "Telltale Tattoos Sunk Jimmy Swaggart." "Peter Fonda's Lingering Childhood Nightmare."

The reason such headlines sell newspapers and magazines is Schadenfreudlichkeit, the enjoyable sin of enjoying others' misfortunes.

The Apostle Paul knew what he was talking about when he said, "love does not rejoice at wrong." Yet we do it all the time in very subtle ways.

Consider that bizarre sense of satisfaction that grasps us when we hear of a person we had always known as having a rigid sense of morals, giving in, or when we hear about a quiet, loving person bursting into a moment of outrage and anger. There is an added "bonus," a negative kind of grace if we can add, "And you know he's a leader in the church, or sings in the choir, or has been a Sunday School teacher for eleven years."

Let someone mention a person's virtue, and we can balance it with a vice. We tend to keep our personal CIA file on people active and up to date. If someone makes too much of a thing out of what a good mother she is, we can easily balance it with a casual, "But you know she can't keep house worth a darn."

Talk about what a good father someone is and we are quick to respond that he can't hold down a good job. If someone praises a person we're a little threatened by or a trifle jealous of, we'll lovingly, of course, keep the books balanced with a "yes, but have you seen his backyard or his garage?" Or "How can he stand the job he has?"

Schadenfreudlichkeit! The enjoyable sin of enjoying others' misfortunes. We even do it with social groups and nations. If the Russians' wheat crop is not what it should have been, we secretly feel that our way of organizing our economy is superior. And we are glad they are worse off than we are.

What is there in us that causes us not to be displeased with the misfortune of others? The Bible calls it our sinfulness — our desire to separate ourselves from others — to make ourselves feel better because others are worse. We want to be in a different category. We don't feel secure unless we are better than someone, and that implies that someone else needs to be worse.

In a sermon entitled, "Action or Reaction," several years ago, I noted that we frequently have a sort of pulley system for evaluating others in relationship to ourselves. On this pulley system, we go up when someone else goes down. Our evaluation of ourselves keeps shifting in relation to what happens to others.

I forget, for example, that if I meet a person who preaches better than I do, this does not diminish my own talents. I still have exactly what I had before, no more and no less. That person's gifts do not devalue mine, nor do mine devalue someone else's.

Yet isn't it true that if we meet someone richer, we feel poorer; someone handsomer, we feel uglier; someone more fluent, we feel tongue-tied; if they are up, we are down.

Conversely, many of us cannot feel comfortable unless we are pulling others down, or we see them pulled down by other forces. And that's why we like to read or hear gossip about others — it's that insidious Schadenfreudlichkeit.

We're like that poor farmer who was moodily regarding the ravages of a flood. "Hiram," yelled a neighbor, "Your pigs were all washed down the creek." "How about Thompson's pigs?" asked

Hiram. “They’re gone too,” said his neighbor. “And Larsen’s pigs?” “Yes, they’re also gone,” said his neighbor. “Hymmph,” said Hiram, cheering up. “Taint as bad as I thought.”

Deep down, we all know that this is nonsense and gets us nowhere. Our lot does not improve because of someone else’s misfortune. We are not thereby made better people. God had not made us or the world so that we improve only at the expense of others going down, or vice versa. In the game of life, we do not win only when others lose. Ultimately, we all win or lose together in this world. God has so made us that we are connected with each other and with creation itself.

Furthermore, if I feel better only when I see someone who is worse, then that’s a very weak foundation on which to build my self-esteem and my life.

It’s a sign of weakness or what our Christian faith calls sin within us when we are always comparing ourselves to others in an attempt to obtain self-worth and security in that manner.

In another place in the New Testament, Jesus told a parable that illustrates how comparing ourselves to others can make us feel bad and cause trouble. He told about a man who hired people to work in his vineyards. In the early morning, he hired some workers and made a contract to pay them one dollar for the day’s work. They were happy with this arrangement because they were unemployed for the day. Later in the day, he found others who were looking for work, and he made the same contract with them, and very late in the day, he did the same with some other unemployed workers.

At the end of the day, when the wages were being paid, those who had worked all day were very jealous of those who worked only part of the day since they were all paid the same even though they had been paid according to what they agreed and were satisfied at the time the contract was made. It was only when they started comparing that jealousy was born. If they had each been paid secretly, no one would have been unhappy, or if the employer had paid those who worked all day first and sent them on their way and then did the same with each group, no one would have known what the others had been paid.

What then is the answer to Schadenfreudlichkeit? It is what the Gospel calls “Grace.”

God accepts us as we are. God accepts us in spite of our feeling of being rejected. God accepts us even when we do not feel as worthwhile as others. And God accepts all others in the same way. It means that even at that moment of Schadenfreudlichkeit, that moment we are secretly enjoying the misfortune of someone else, God accepts us. And God accepts them as well. The fact that God accepts and loves us as we are means we are free from the tyranny of always comparing, of always measuring our worth against someone else’s fortune or misfortune.

In the experience of this grace, we then have the grace to “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” We can be happy at the fortune of others and unhappy at the misfortune of others. Since we are connected to them, their good fortune is also our good fortune, and their misfortune is also our misfortune. Everything is transformed. We are able to experience the grace of being able to accept the lives of others, their good fortune or bad fortunes.

And this grace gives us also the power to accept ourselves without the constant measuring and comparing of ourselves with others because we know we have been accepted by that which is greater than we. We are accepted by God. Amen.