Sunday, January 20, 1991
DISCOVERING GOD'S SPIRITUAL GIFTS (No. 2 in a Series: The Gift of Joy)
Psalm 118:24; John 15:7-10

"This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." — Psalm 118:24

There are a number of Bible verses and stories that have become my favorites over the years, and the one I've just recited is near the top of the list. It reminds me that you and I are created for joy, and if we miss it, we miss the reason for our existence. Joy is one of God's most precious spiritual gifts to us. A few weeks ago, on the Sunday before Christmas, the sermon was also about joy. It is such an important spiritual gift and so much needed these days that during these past weeks, I have felt more strongly than ever that God wanted me to use it as the subject for another sermon.

Jesus himself told us, according to the Gospel of John, that one of the primary reasons for God sending him to us was so that his joy might be in us and therefore our joy would be complete. That's quite a promise.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, also mentions joy as being one of the fruits of the Spirit. In other words, we know that God's Spirit is truly in us when we are joyful. To refresh your memory, here's what he said: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

In one of the early catechisms of the church, the first question is, "What is the chief end of women and men?" And the answer: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever."

So we can safely believe that when we think about joy as a gift from God, we are at the edge of life's deepest secret. We are not talking about emotional frills and psychic indulgences; we are talking about the discovery of the all-rightness in the essence of life.

But some of us have so much trouble discovering God's gift of joy. Kierkegaard wrote, and I paraphrase: most of us spend our lives building mansions for ourselves, and when we finish, we choose to live in the dog house. Or in John Bunyan's sad figure, we lock ourselves in a cage in the center of a dark room, and then complain that God put us there.

What is joy? To answer this question for yourself, think for a moment about a time in your own life that was, for you, a moment of deep joy. What happened to give you joy?

I remember the deep joy I experienced when each of our three children was born. I have known a similar joy at the birth of each one of our grandchildren.

I have also known joy when I've been able to do something for someone else without them knowing about it.

I experience deep and abiding joy when listening to good music. Sometimes I feel so joyful in the midst of our worship services here that chills run up and down my spine. A few years ago at a minister's meeting, I heard Bill Moyers give an address, and I was so deeply moved with joy that tears flowed freely down my cheeks. Even now, when I remember the event, tears come to my eyes, even though I can't recall much of what he said. I discovered God's gift of

joy within me as I had never felt it before. And at the same time, I felt the presence of God in my life and that life, at its center, was good.

When I asked a friend of mine about his moments of deep joy, he remembered and described a concert one night when he heard the violinist Isaac Stern playing with a symphony orchestra. He said his heart was set on fire. Everyone in the audience was deeply moved. The applause was lengthy, and Mr. Stern received it graciously and played several encores. It was an experience of joy.

Joy is a gift from God that interrupts the routine motion of life. Our lives, for the most part, are motion and struggle. Most of us spend our time crawling, groping, climbing, sometimes running, but always moving like the works of a clock. But now and then, joy comes to stop or change the motion. Any moment that opens us up to the reality that life is good, that life is a gift, a blessing, is a moment of joy and reminds us that we were made for joy. “This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Joy is our inheritance, our birthright. We do not need to earn it. We cannot earn it. Joy is always a gift, yet some people doubt their right to be joyful. I hear people ask all the time, “Is joy appropriate for the serious and sensitive Christian in our time? Is it fitting for people like us, who have all we need and more, to be joyful while children are starving and with all the other problems which the world continually faces?”

Whenever I wonder whether joy can be a proper emotion in our world where there is still so much suffering, I am encouraged by the impression I get from people closest to suffering. Although I have never met her, I sense a deep and abiding joy in Mother Teresa, whose life has been closely connected with a ministry to the suffering. And there are countless others like her who have spent their lives in the middle of suffering. The joy these people radiate reminds me that tragedy is not the last word. Joy is a natural by-product of giving your life to others. Jesus said, “Those who seek to have or hoard their lives will lose them, and those who give their lives away will find them.”

This is still God’s creation. The touch of a loving hand is God’s hand. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a constant reminder that God is always giving and that God even suffers with us, and so I have permission to rejoice even in a world of pain. It has been my experience that there is often more joy in and among people who have less than among people who have more. Joy, when you come down to it, is a feeling that it is all right with us even when everything seems wrong.

Has it not been your experience that giving people are joyful people? And the most joyful are those who give secretly.

But why do some people have so much difficulty discovering God’s gift of joy? While it is true that joy cannot be manufactured, we can close ourselves off to joy. We can harden ourselves against it. Some people close themselves to joy by being stingy. We can be “killjoys.” We can keep so busy that we crush joy out of our days. We can regard life as such a solemn matter that we lose even the desire for joy.

Some people kill joy in themselves through a lust for virtue. Now don’t misunderstand, I am not against virtue, but I have met some people who believe they are never virtuous enough to deserve joy. Others want credit for being so virtuous, and they never get enough credit to be

joyful. They forget that joy is not something that is earned by being extra good. Joy is a spiritual gift from God. It is not a reward for being virtuous.

Furthermore, lust for virtue is the denial of grace in our lives. And the denial of grace is the most fatal of all joy killers.

Another way in which many of us kill joy in ourselves is through the nurture of an illusion that we are accountable for all the ills of the world. In our silly pride, we are stupid enough to suppose that God expects us to carry on our little backs a load that only Jesus can bear.

The feeling of being totally accountable for all the suffering and wrong in the world is a special temptation for sensitive and moral people. It seduces them to feel fully responsible for every oppressed person, every hungry child, and every victim of racism. If they are parents, they insist on feeling accountable for everything their grown children do, accepting guilt for their failures and taking credit for their successes. The more sensitive you are to other people's troubles and your own responsibility, the more vulnerable you are to the temptation of total accountability, and the more likely you are to forget that only God is infinite and that we are only finite.

There is a wonderful story about Pope John XXIII. He was being hounded by a serious Cardinal to do something decisive to resolve the unsolved tragedies of the modern world. The Pope put his arm around the Cardinal and said that he too knew the temptation to accept total accountability for the whole world. He was personally helped, the Pope said, by an angel who came to him at night in the papal bedroom and said, "Hey there, Johnny boy, don't take yourself so seriously." Sometimes I feel like I need an angel like Pope John's.

Another way in which we kill joy in ourselves is by inflating problems in our lives to the size of catastrophes. Have you had that experience? You make a mistake and overdraw your checking account, and you are convinced that you face financial disaster. You discover that one of your children experimented with marijuana, and you are convinced that your whole family is now ruined. You have an argument with your spouse, and you are ready for divorce.

I know people who make a mistake and are not satisfied to admit that they blow it once in a while, but rather think that their whole world has come to an end. They keep saying over and over again, "If only I had done it differently." And they keep putting themselves down. There's no room for joy in that kind of life. Every little problem becomes a hopeless catastrophe. When we do this, we forget that when we trust God, we gain a sense of perspective. Our Christian faith reminds us that God can and does turn catastrophes into problems that are manageable. The Bible reminds us that God is always making all things new.

We not only frequently kill joy in ourselves, but we also kill joy in others whenever we refuse to let them have joy in the giving of their gift, whatever the gift may be, or when we refuse to let someone around us enjoy being thankful for the gift. We kill other people's joy when we make them feel their gift is not good enough for giving.

As Christians, we need to remember that Jesus most frequently described God's kingdom as being like a fantastic banquet, a wedding feast, a time of joy and happiness.

One religious commentator put it this way: "We Christians often represent our faith rather badly. The glum, sour faces of many Christians, who frequently enough look as if they had gallstones (all those who really have them will excuse me), are poor proclaimers of that

wedding joy. They rather give the impression that, instead of coming from God's joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now are sorry that they can't get them back again."

If creation is a blessing, as our faith says it is, then our proper response is joy. Unfortunately, to take joy in God's creation ("This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it") has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives.

In fact, I think some people have difficulty discovering God's spiritual gift of joy because they are afraid of it. They don't have time for it. After all, they say, life is serious business. They are afraid to let go, to laugh, to dance, to sing. They are unhappy with life and want others to be unhappy too. They are convinced that the world is no good, and any time there appears to be any evidence to the contrary, they do their best to avoid it. The old saying is that misery loves company. Misery not only loves company, it demands it. There are some people who, if they are not having a good time, do not want anyone else to have a good time either.

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Begin each day of your life with that phrase in your mind. Today, as you leave this service of worship, and as you go about your duties, remember that the gift of joy can be yours, and it is a gift. You cannot earn it.

Leave this place of joy today and resolve to be confident and joyful in everything that happens to you today and tomorrow because God has made this creation and God is in control. Say a good word to the colleague who gets on your nerves or that person in the house who annoys you, and do it in the name of God. Do a good deed in secret!

Remember also that Jesus said over and over again that God's kingdom is like being invited to a party. If you accept that invitation, do not be afraid of joy. It is God's gift and God's intention for you. Amen.