Sunday, November 24, 1991
WHAT IT MEANS TO ENJOY GOD
Romans 8 (selected verses)

As we approach Thanksgiving and the soon-to-come joyful season of Advent and Christmas, I want us to consider what it means to "enjoy" God.

I often wonder, how many people truly and deeply enjoy God. Do you? Not just believe in God, but do you enjoy God? It's an important question. I'm sure that there are many individuals who have never thought of enjoyment and God being connected.

Sometimes we Christians tend to be too grim and serious in our religious faith. Too often, going to church and experiencing the presence of God is thought of as being a burden — boring, stern, and dull. I've met people who have given me the impression that their religious faith has taken the joy out of life rather than helping them to enjoy life. As someone wrote, "The trouble with the religion of many people is that there is never any ecstasy, no hop, skip, and jump — just a dutiful trudge.... Some people never dance. They walk solemnly and arthritically toward the cemetery." I believe it is possible to enjoy God. If I didn't, I wouldn't be in the ministry.

That's why I've always appreciated the first question and answer in the Westminster Catechism. "What is the chief end of human beings?" To paraphrase, what are we here for? For what purpose did God create us? And the answer that is given is: "Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." Did you hear that? Our purpose for living is to enjoy God!

We Christians are to be the most joyful people on earth, and that means enjoying God and life here and now — every minute, every hour, every day. Nowhere did Jesus say, "I have come to bring gloom and darkness into your life." He did not say, "I have come to make you miserable." Nowhere in the Bible is it said or implied that religion should be a burden. He said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." In another place, he said, "Be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest for your souls. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Furthermore, throughout his teachings as recorded in the New Testament, Jesus frequently used the metaphor for the reign of God as a joyous feast or banquet. Yet many Christians, with their glum and sour faces, frequently look as if they had gallstones and give the impression that, instead of going to or coming from God's joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now are sorry they can't get them back again. We seem to imply that sin is more fun than enjoying God.

If creation is a blessing, as our faith says it is, then our proper response is to enjoy it. Pleasure of this kind is one of the deepest spiritual experiences in our lives. Ecstasy is the experience of it. But this kind of pleasure does not always come easily when our main emphasis is on getting more and more for ourselves or if we keep stressing our sin and unworthiness.

God's invitation is a call to delight in God's creation — to learn the art of savoring. Creation needs savoring more than it needs inventory-taking. To savor is to enjoy something for itself. It is to contemplate, to take pleasure in. To savor is to appreciate, to be grateful, rather than to

appraise. Far too often, our only question or concern in looking at something is “What’s it worth?” rather than enjoying it for what it is.

Unfortunately, to enjoy God — to laugh, to sing, to dance, to take pleasure in God’s creation — has not always been suggested as an essential dimension of our spiritual lives. In fact, too often, it’s been the opposite. Christians have been asked, “Did you take pleasure in it?” as a test of whether or not an action was a sin in that tradition. To equate pleasure or enjoyment or delight in God’s creation as being sinful is heresy.

Someone said, “Too often we give the impression that God’s presence is about as welcome as a state trooper when you’re doing 75 on the interstate. The Bible becomes a heavenly rendition of ‘Rules For The Road,’ and the church is traffic court, where guilty offenders gather to be sentenced and pay their fines.”

I’ve always admired our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith because they seem to know how to enjoy God more than many Christians. Listen to the Psalms.

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praises to your name, O Most High.” (Psalm 9:1-2)

“I was glad (filled with joy) when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.'” (Psalm 122:1)

“This is the day that God has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24)

Ari L. Goldman, the religion reporter for the New York Times and an Orthodox Jew, in his recent book The Search for God at Harvard, describes his enjoyment of God, especially on the Jewish Sabbath. He remembers the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday night. “It was a time when, by the magic of the Sabbath candles, we were transformed into a happy, picture-book family. The recriminations and bickering would cease, and the music would begin. We would sit at the gleaming white table in our Sabbath outfits, dark blue pants and white cotton shirts open at the collar. Our hair was still wet from our pre-Sabbath baths, and it was combed neatly across our foreheads. My mother waved her hands over the lighted candles and covered her eyes as she stood in a moment of silent meditation. Afterwards, she took us into her arms and kissed us, lingering an extra moment to drink in our freshness. She told us that we looked like the two angels that tradition says accompany men home from the Friday night synagogue service.”

“When a little while later my father returned home from the synagogue, we lined up in front of him for the Sabbath blessing, my brother first and then me. Bending down to reach us, my father cradled our heads between his strong hands as he recited the blessing, ‘May God bless you and keep you, and give you peace.'”

Later, when Ari was married and had his own family, he continued to enjoy God. He writes, “For me, Sabbath candles still held their magic. There was a perfect moment of silence when Shira (my wife) would light them in our apartment as the sun went down on Friday evenings. She would wave her hands three times over the blue-and-white flames, cover her eyes, and recite her private prayers.”

“With the arrival of Sabbath, our house would be transformed. The TV, the radio, the record player, the food processor, and the word processor were shut off. Cooking and cleaning ceased. It was time to truly enjoy God.”

As a child, Ari wrote that he also learned to enjoy God because of the little prayers of thanksgiving that he was taught by his mother to say daily and even hourly. There was a little prayer for the vegetables, another for pastries, one that was said when you saw a rainbow, and one after recovering from an illness. And there was a long laundry list of daily prayers, giving thanks for waking up, for freedom, for new clothes, for the ability to study Torah, and even upon leaving the bathroom, thanking God for our internal plumbing system. He was taught to say at least a hundred little prayers of thanksgiving each day. That makes God a part of your everyday life, and you enjoy God because you are always conscious of God’s blessings and goodness. Being thankful to God and enjoying God go together.

Perhaps some people cannot enjoy God because they are afraid of joy in any part of their lives. Have you met people who are afraid of joy? Afraid to celebrate? Afraid to let go and laugh? Afraid to have a good time? Afraid to sing and dance? There are some individuals who are always unhappy with life and want others to be unhappy too. “Misery loves company,” is the old saying. 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 or counteract it. And if you have a warm glow of enjoying life, they do their best to douse it. No matter how good something is, they always manage to find at least one thing wrong with it.

Although some of us have difficulty affirming the joy that others feel, at the same time, we are good at joining with them in their tragedy. Perhaps it’s because we have a slight feeling of superiority when someone else suffers a tragedy, and it makes us feel good to feel bad about it. Some people seem to want to build their emotional lives, their inner security, on the weaknesses of others. When others feel worse, they feel better. In the long run, however, it never works.

There may be those who remember a sermon I did a little over three years ago, which had the title of a German word, Schadenfreude. An English definition of the word is: “the enjoyable sin of enjoying others’ misfortunes.” We had a lot of requests for that sermon because everyone knew from his or her own experience what I was talking about. Haven’t you found yourself at times rejoicing not only at the misfortune of your enemies but also secretly enjoying the misfortunes of your friends? 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. We don’t even like to admit to ourselves that we have the feeling. We know it’s the wrong kind of joy.

Isn’t it strange that we should secretly feel some satisfaction that sometimes evil gets its way with a person, that good is defeated, or 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. Maybe it’s because we’ve felt that life’s been unfair to us, and it’s nice to know we are not alone.

It’s kind of a bizarre sense of enjoyment that takes hold of us when we hear of a person we had always known as being a bit self-righteous or 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’s 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 is a TV evangelist, or has been a Sunday School teacher for eleven years."

But when someone we know is rejoicing, has gotten a promotion, is radiant, or is successful, we may have difficulty in joining with them in their joy. However, to truly enjoy God means we are able to enjoy the success and good fortune of others as well.

Ben and Jerry were two college dropouts who sent away for a five-dollar mail order course on how to make ice cream. After only a few short years, they were the largest producers of gourmet ice cream in the world. As their company grew, it became apparent to them that their jobs had ceased to be fun. Work and its responsibilities were robbing them of their zest and creativity. They began to assess their company and determined that they were not in business to sell ice cream but to create joy.

Realizing their purpose, they hired a person to serve as Director of Joy for the company. The job consisted of planning fun activities and celebrations for the company and the community. Believing they were in the joy business, they set aside seven and one-half percent of their pretax profits for charities, festivals, community service, and special causes. If joy is our product, we are free to find new, creative ways to serve and encourage one another. When the stock market plummeted on Black Monday, panic and desperation were everywhere. Ben and Jerry were on the sidewalks of Wall Street scooping out free bowls of "Economic Crunch" ice cream.

Perhaps as Christians, we can learn something from these two ice cream entrepreneurs. Have we lost sight of the product of our faith? Maybe all of us in the church are to be "directors of joy." What would you do differently in your home if you were "Director of Joy?"

Here's the ultimate reason that we can enjoy God — grace! Grace means that God loves us first, long before we are aware of it, and that this love never ends. Grace means that God loves us freely, not because of who we are or what we've done, but because we are created in the divine image. Grace means that God loves us always, no matter how far we stray, or how deep we fall. Remember the angel's message to the shepherds that first Christmas, "Do not be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." That's why we sing, "Joy to the world."

We will never be able to truly enjoy God as long as we think we need to earn God's love. We can abandon all self-righteousness. There's nothing we need to do to impress God. When the reality of God's grace sinks into our lives, we will not be able to contain the joy.

Today, as you leave this service of worship and as you go about living your life, remember that God has invited you to a banquet, and God continues to invite you. Therefore, do not be afraid to enjoy the party, and in so doing, enjoy God. Become a director of joy. Amen.