Sunday, December 19, 1993
GIVING THE GIFT OF FUN (No. 4 in a Series: Priceless Gifts)
Luke 1:26-38

In looking through my Christmas sermon files, I came across this Christmas limerick, which I've used before, but perhaps you've forgotten. It was written by an eleven-year-old child:

There was a young woman 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."

The gift of a good example, the gift of time, and the gift of seeing the best in others — these three are priceless gifts we can give to those we love, those with whom we work, and countless others. All are eternal gifts; they never wear out, do not need batteries, and are, in the first place, gifts from God.

Today we are going to consider one more such priceless gift that each one of us can give — the gift of fun, which includes joy and laughter. Here's why it's such an important gift during this season.

There are more people than we sometimes realize who approach Christmas with apprehension rather than anticipation, with fear instead of joy. For some, it is a sad and lonely time.

More people become depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. Too much drinking, too little sleep, frayed nerves, and exhausting schedules all combine to take away the fun and joy in life, which is a gift that God wants each one of us to possess and to give.

Some people are sad because the holidays remind them of all the people gone from their lives: parents who have died, friends who have moved away, and families who cannot get together.

Then, too, for many adults, there is the reality that Christmas can never be the kind of magical and mysterious holiday it was for them as children. So, there is a lot of regretting at this time of year. There are attempts by people to recapture the old feelings by spending large amounts of money on gifts, and this device works for a while for some. But the newness of the gifts wears off, and life returns to its normal routine.

Threading itself through some of these emotions is the problem of money because what a gift costs too often becomes a measuring stick of our sense of worth. Some people try to measure what someone thinks of them by the cost of the gift that has been given to them. Or if we're the giver of the gift to someone else, we don't want to be thought of as cheap.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts some people during this season. This is rooted partly in the misguided notion that everyone else is happy when Christmas approaches, and by comparison, we don't feel as happy, and we wonder why. Is there something wrong with us? We talk about having or not having the "Christmas spirit."

Perhaps we misunderstand the Christmas message as it relates to the birth of Jesus. The story of the birth of the Christ-child in Bethlehem has never implied that life has no problems — that there is no evil in the world. I know someone who sent out a Christmas card with a quote from St. Augustine, one 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 new parents who had to run away to Egypt soon after the baby was born and of all little boy babies being killed in the region of Bethlehem and beyond.

Christmas is the story of the birth of a baby who was the Savior of the world, yet who, as a young man, was crucified. But that is not the end of the story. This same Savior overcame death and lives on in all of us. That love which became flesh in Jesus in Bethlehem can never be extinguished.

So, as we celebrate this Christmas, in spite of our personal and worldwide problems, in spite of our depressed moods and our worries about money and gifts, I want to suggest that we give ourselves and others the priceless gift of fun.

The gift of fun can be given in so many little ways as well as big ones. The gift of fun is especially needed because there are always people around us who, oftentimes without knowing it, undermine the joy in life. They do this by finding the flaws in any situation and emphasizing them. They always see the downside, never the upside.

Consider this example: A young woman who was having trouble with feelings of depression told her counselor that she remembered that as a child, her home was a gloomy place, and there was little time for fun and enjoyment. Everything was lacking in joy. There was an absence of simple gratitude and courtesy. 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 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 receiving this priceless gift from others. She kept working at it by trying to see what was good in life instead of continually looking for the flaws and magnifying them.

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 40th 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 beautiful 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. Incidentally, the roast beef was a little well done." And all the fun began to fade away.

This Christmas, be a grateful receiver of gifts and give 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 we are taking life lightly or forgetting that there are problems and difficulties. Rather, it is to recognize that fun is a part of life. It is built into the creation by God. Watch little children, even those we consider deprived because of their lack of material things — they have lots of fun naturally until some adult puts a damper on it.

As I said in an earlier sermon in this series, what I remember most about the Christmas season as I was growing up is the pure, unadulterated fun we had together as a family during this time of year. And most of the fun came not from the gifts we received, but from the joy of being with each other and from the games we played together: cousins, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, and friends. We gave to each other the gift of fun, and we received that gift as well.

The gift of fun is difficult for some to give and to receive. Psychologists describe a condition called “Sunday depression.” People who have this problem usually feel fine as 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 knew a man who had this condition. During the week, when he was working as an accountant, he felt fine. On Sundays and holidays, however, he felt terrible. When he went back to work again on Monday morning, he started to feel better.

As I got to know this man, I learned more about the origin of his Sunday depressions. When he was a child, his parents owned a small newspaper and candy store. To make even a small profit, his parents had to open the store at six in the morning and didn’t close until nine or ten at night. Whenever he saw his parents, they were working, and to make it worse, they didn’t discover any fun in their work.

As a result, this individual never learned how to play and have fun. After a time, he came to realize that his parents’ circumstances were quite different from his and that he didn’t need to feel guilty or depressed when he had some free time. Fortunately, he learned to receive and to give the gift of fun with his children and with others.

Last January, I was in the airport in Orlando, Florida, waiting to return to Lincoln. Most of the people there were families who were returning from a winter holiday trip. An announcement was made that the airplane for this particular flight had mechanical problems and would be delayed in departure for at least two hours or more. A loud moan arose from the passengers in the gate waiting area. A half hour later, I took a walk around to see what people were doing.

One set of parents had borrowed a deck of playing 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. Then I saw and heard a father yelling at his two children, saying that he would never take them anywhere again. They hadn’t done anything unusual. It wasn’t their fault that the plane was delayed. I wondered why he didn’t take the opportunity to give his children the gift of fun?

It can be so easy and delightful to give the gift of fun. It’s a gift we can give to people of all ages. As I read the New Testament stories of Jesus, I’m convinced that he was a fun-loving and fun-giving individual. Why else would he be called by his enemies, “a glutton and a winebibber?”

In a recent study, children were asked what they liked about their grandparents. Very young children at first said they liked grandparents who gave them material gifts. 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 that involve fun are found in all cultures. They include games, contests, festivals, dancing, feasting, singing, and laughing — they are a part of being human and gifts from God.

The intention of play and the fun that accompanies it is joy, and when this intention is realized, we have an experience that transcends our everyday world. When we are in the midst of joyful play and fun, we step from time into eternity. When adults play or even work with genuine joy and fun, we momentarily regain the deathlessness of childhood. This can happen even in the face of acute suffering and dying.

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

That's why I've always appreciated that first question in the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of human beings?" In other words, "For what purpose did God create us?" And the answer is: "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." Or to paraphrase, "We are here to give God glory, and we do this best when we are celebrating and enjoying life and giving the gift of fun."

This Christmas season, give the gift of fun. Play games, laugh together, sing together, eat together, give to others unselfishly, and in so doing, you will be glorifying God. Amen.