Sunday, April 17, 1994
THE JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 1 in a Series: The First Step)
Romans 7:15-20

There was a father who was trying to take a Sunday afternoon nap in his living room, but his young daughter kept pestering him, saying she was bored. The father, trying to come up with a game, found a picture of a globe in the newspaper — a picture of the world. So he cut this up into a number of pieces and told his daughter that it was a puzzle and she should try to put it back together. He lay down to finish his nap, thinking he would now have enough time for a good rest. But in about 15 minutes, his young daughter woke him up and said that she had finished. She had put it all back together. He couldn't believe it. He knew his daughter didn't know all the positions of the nations, so he asked her how she did it so quickly. She said, "Dad, there was a picture of a person on the other side of the map, and when I got my person put together, the world looked just fine."

Today, I'm beginning a new sermon series that will help you to put and keep your person together. It's called the "Journey to Joy." If I wanted to use another popular metaphor, I could call it the "road to recovery." It's a follow-up sermon series to the one I did before Easter on "Living A God-Directed Life," and it's dedicated to this year's Confirmation Class, which joined the church last Sunday.

It's amazing how much better the world looks when your person is put together. We're going to be talking in this series about how to better handle and overcome the hurts in your life, the habits that are fouling up your life, and the obstacles that continue to cause pain in your life.

What does this have to do with your Christian faith? Quite a lot. After all, what the Christian faith is all about is changing people, converting them, helping people to be "born again," so that they become new persons and, hopefully, also want to change society for the better. Living the Christian life, following the Christian way, is a "journey to joy." But it's not always an easy matter. Even when you have given yourself over to God's direction, you frequently go off course. There are times when we lose our way.

In his book Further Along the Road Less Traveled, Dr. M. Scott Peck writes, "Life is complex. Each one of us must make our own path through life. There are no self-help manuals, no formulas, no easy answers...The journey of life is not paved in blacktop; it is not brightly lit, and it has no road signs. It is a rocky path through the wilderness." Then Peck goes on to say, "But we do not have to make the journey alone. We can ask for help from the force in our lives that we recognize to be greater than we are. A force we all see differently, but of whose presence most of us are aware. And as we make our way, we can help each other."

For those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus, that "force" is God, and we know that God wants us to help each other on the journey to joy. In fact, God most frequently helps us through our helping of each other. But even then, we can get lost at times.

St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Rome: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." We all know that experience.

A few days ago, one of our church members sent me this story. A man moved to a new city and started looking for a church to join. He was about to give up finding just the right one until, one Sunday, he dropped in to a church and heard the congregation pray, “We have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” The newcomer slipped into a pew and with a sigh of relief, said to himself, “Thank God, I’ve found my crowd at last.”

Some years ago, there was a word that was commonly used in the church, a word and concept we need to recover: that word was “sanctification.” It means that after conversion, after a person becomes a follower of Jesus, there is a constant nurturing process needed to keep on course in our journey because we human beings are not always easy to change after all. We keep slipping back into our old bad habits, oftentimes without being aware of it.

To return to the metaphor of life as a journey and the Christian faith as a journey to joy, we get stopped or sidetracked on our journey; we take wrong turns, get lost, and have difficulty getting back on the main road. And for those of us who are men, we don’t want to ask for directions because it’s so difficult for us to admit that we are lost in the first place, and secondly, we find it difficult to ask for help. For some reason, we hate to stop and ask for directions.

The original twelve disciples who were with Jesus day by day had the same experience. They found themselves continually falling back into their old habits and ways of thinking.

Years ago, when religious revivals were popular in this country, they often ran for two weeks in a town. The first week was for the “backsliders,” those who had been converted a year or more ago and who needed reviving because they had reverted back into their old ways. The second week was for the conversion of new Christians. We human beings are rarely changed once and for all. It’s an ongoing process in the same way as the journey to joy is an ongoing process. We can be taught many complicated things, and our memories and capabilities for retention are incredible, but when we turn to the modification of ingrained habits, of basic values, of personality traits, then it’s a different matter.

Fortunately, the Christian faith as lived and taught by Jesus carries within it the steps that can guide us along the journey to joy or the road to recovery. “Twelve-step” organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous are built on spiritual principles that come straight out of the life and teachings of Jesus. This sermon series is based on those spiritual truths.

It is further based on the assumption that God created us for joy — to live joyful and fulfilling lives. We are here, as the ancient catechism says, “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.” Therefore, God’s help is always available to us as we travel on the journey to joy. God travels along with us.

So, for example, when you are hurt, God wants to help heal you. When you are confused, God is ready to lead you. When you feel that you are helpless to change something that needs to be changed in your life for the better, God is willing and ready to help you change whatever it is. When you feel that no one understands you, God is still there to comfort you. When you are worried, anxious, or afraid, God is ready to offer peace to you. When your burdens are too heavy for you to bear, God will help you carry them, and there are times when God will even carry you.

In this sermon series, we are going to be considering some of the steps we can take when we get off course on our journey to joy. But before we look at the first step, there’s an important

spiritual truth we need to remember about all of our steps in life — even the longest journey begins with the first step. In addition, the journey to joy in life is most often a series of small steps, a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of the other.

Some people want to go through life by making only big leaps. Here's a person who expects to become a star athlete quickly without going through the patient, day-by-day rigorous training and learning all the fundamentals.

Or here is a person who wants to become an accomplished piano player instantly and wants to skip over all the daily practice, the finger exercises, and the playing of scales.

Here is another individual who joined a company after receiving his master's degree in business administration and expects to be one of the top executives in a very short period of time.

Or here is a person who had a dramatic conversion experience and expects that in every part of her life from now on, without any effort on her part, she will be a completely new person, that she will never face temptation again. But spiritual maturity, like all other forms of maturity, is not an instant process.

All of us tend to forget that life is a series of small steps, a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of the other. We cannot mature spiritually in an instant. Spiritual growth, like other kinds of growth, takes time. True lasting change most frequently takes place slowly, day by day, in the same way that our physical growth changes slowly and almost imperceptibly. It is only by looking back over a period of time that we become aware of the amount of change that has taken place.

This sermon series is for everyone, unless there is someone out there who is already perfect, someone who never stumbles or strays or limps or hurts anyone else, or has no hurts or pain, someone who makes no mistakes and has no habits or hang-ups he or she would like to change.

The good news is this: regardless of the problem you need to recover from, whether it's emotional, financial, relational, spiritual, regardless of what you need recovery from, the steps to recovery, the basic steps to get back on the main road of the journey to joy, are very much alike.

The first step toward recovery when you are losing your way on the journey to joy is to realize that you have a problem that is too big for you to solve on your own power. It is to admit that you are losing or have lost your way and that you need the help of God to return to the journey to joy.

A.A. has taken this first step and broken it down into its first two steps: (1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable, and (2) came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Why is it so difficult for us human beings to admit we have a problem that we cannot solve all by ourselves, that some part of our life has become unmanageable, and that it is beyond our own power to get it under control?

First of all, it's difficult for us to admit we have a problem that cannot be solved with our own power because God has given each one of us an enormous amount of power and tremendous potential. Therefore, it's tempting for us to think that we have ultimate power. It's the temptation to want to play God and to believe that each of us can solve any and all problems all by ourselves, that we can make our own decisions about right and wrong without needing any help or advice from anyone, even God. Of course, there are many problems we can solve ourselves. The hard part is knowing when the problem is too big for us and then admitting that we need help.

We are always tempted to think that we know more than we do. We want to believe that we are in control of everything. We don't like to admit that we have any deficiencies, or as Carl Jung described it, that we have a shadow side to our personality.

Jung went on to theorize that the evil we do as human beings results from our refusal to meet our shadow, that part of our personality that we like to deny. Note that Jung ascribed human evil not to the shadow itself, but to the refusal to meet or acknowledge this shadow. In other words, it's extremely difficult for us to admit that we have any serious problem that we cannot solve all by ourselves. We want to be in control.

Thus, the alcoholic says, "I can quit anytime." I once asked a TV repairman, "What is the worst kind of problem you have to deal with?" He said, "The damage that's done when people try to fix their own TVs."

A second reason that it's difficult for us to admit that we have a serious problem is that it's so easy to put the blame for our problems, failures, and difficulties on someone else. We go through life blaming others for our pain and for our failures. "Why do you drink?" I asked an alcoholic more than 35 years ago. "Because my wife nags me." "Why do you nag your husband?" I asked his wife. "Because he drinks," she said.

Dr. M. Scott Peck calls those who are always blaming others "people of the lie" because one of their distinguishing characteristics is their ability to lie to themselves as well as to others and to insist on being ignorant of their own faults or wrongdoing. Their guiding motive is to feel good about themselves at all costs, at all times, no matter what evidence there may be that points to their own sin or imperfection. They place all the blame on others. It's a temptation we all face. It's another form of denial.

So today, ask yourself, "What problem or hurt or habit or hang-up needs dealing with, needs healing in my life? What needs changing in my life?" First, you need to admit you have the problem, and then second, determine whether you can change it on your own power or need the help of God and others. How serious does the problem have to get before you admit you need help? The fact is, we never change until our pain becomes greater than the fear of change. Someone said, "We don't change when we see the light; we change when we feel the heat." It's when the marriage starts falling apart, or the children start going the wrong way, or our bad habit gets us into trouble at work, or you get that phone call in the middle of the night, or your physician tells you the choice is between change or a health problem that can lead to your early death, then and then only do some people consider admitting they have a problem.

Save yourself some pain. Start early on your recovery. Take the first step in correcting your path on the journey to joy. One person said, "I began to admit I had a problem when the acid of my pain finally ate through the wall of my denial."

And then take the second step: determine whether or not you need the help of God and others in dealing with your problem and your pain.

How's your pain level this morning? It's a warning light to you. God is ready and waiting to empower you. It's when you admit your weakness that God's strength begins to work. Amen.