Sunday April 17, 1994

THE JOURNEY TO JOY Romans 7:15-20

(No. 1 in a series: The First Step)

There was a father who was trying to take a Sunday afternoon nap in his living room and his young daughter kept pestering him by saying she was bored. The father, trying to make up 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 this was a puzzle and that she should try to put it back together. He laid down to finish his nap, thinking he would now have a enough time for a good nap. But in about 15 minutes his young daughter woke him up and said that she had it 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 which 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 years 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 how to 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's this got 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 you become a new person and hopefully you will 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 new book, FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, Dr. M. Scott Peck has this to say about life's journey. "Life is complex. Each one of us must make his 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." And then Peck goes on to say, "But we do not have to make the journey alone. We can ask help of 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 us who call ourselves followers of Jesus, that "force" is God and we know that God wants us to

help each other in 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 needed a constant nurturing process to keep on course in our journey because we human beings are not always that 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 we get sidetracked on our journey; we take wrong turns, we get lost and have difficulty getting back on the main road. And for 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 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, and 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 on going 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 ingrown 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 which can give us guidance along the journey to joy or the road to recovery. "Twelve step" organizations

such as Alcoholic's Anonymous are built on spiritual principles which 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 which we need to remember about all of our steps in life--even the longest journey begins with the first step and in addition, the journey to joy in life is most of the time a series of small steps, a matter of putting one foot faithfully in front of another.

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 instantly an accomplished piano player 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 having received 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 by day, in the same way that our physical growth changes slowly and almost imperceptibly. It is only in looking back over a period of time are we 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 its 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 which 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 to 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 is a result of our refusal to meet our shadow, that part of our personality which 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 ourself. 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 TV."

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, can you change it on your own power or do you 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 warn-

ing light to you. God is reading and waiting to empower you. It's when you admit your weakness that God's strength begins to work. Amen.

more about that next week.