Sunday, April 24, 1994
JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 2 in a Series: Finding Help for Your Hurt)
II Corinthians 12:7-10

There's a story going around that grew out of the floods that took place last year. A reporter from a local newspaper went to interview one of the families whose house was in the middle of the flood. When he got to the top of the roof of the house, he found only the wife of the couple who owned the home. She was there watching many of their belongings and the personal property of others float down the stream. The reporter joined her as they watched various objects go by. Some lawn chairs floated by, then a picnic table, and after a few minutes, they saw a hat floating by. After it floated downstream about twenty feet, they saw it turn and float upstream about the same distance, and then go downstream again. The reporter watched this strange behavior as it happened seven or eight times. Finally, he asked the wife, "What's going on? Do you have any idea why that hat is going one direction and then the other?" She said, "Oh, that's just my crazy husband Glenn. He said he was going to mow the lawn today come hell or high water."

Isn't that the case with a lot of people? They go on mowing the lawn while everything else in their life is falling apart. They are like the people who kept rearranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic as it was sinking.

That's part of the reason I'm doing this sermon series. There are so many individuals who have habits, hurts, and difficulties that are destroying their lives and getting them off track from life's journey to joy. Since none of us is perfect, we all need recovery from some problem in our life.

As we noted last week, the root cause of many of our problems is our desire to be in control of everything. Here's a statement about "control" that I believe is true: That which we love the most is that which we can control the least. That's also true of God. Because God loves each one of us unconditionally, God gives us freedom of choice. God does not control us like puppets on strings. In addition to freedom, God has also given each one of us a great deal of power and incredible potential. These are great blessings, but all blessings are potential curses. So it's a natural temptation to believe that we know everything and can do everything and that we don't need help from anyone. We tend to excuse ourselves and at the same time blame others. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "The individual who can smile when he or she has made a mistake has found someone else to blame it on."

How do we break out of this pattern? The first step is to overcome our tendency for denial and our tendency to blame others, and to admit that we have a problem and that we cannot solve any and all problems by ourselves. And for many people, that's not easy. It's not easy to admit we limp.

What is it that can finally cause us to face up to our problem? Pain! As I said last week, we rarely change when we see the light; we change when we feel the heat. Most people rarely move into recovery until they are forced into it because there's no other option.

Sometimes it takes a crisis in our lives to get our attention. For others, it takes confrontation. Somebody cares enough to tell you that you need help. Sometimes, of course, you might try to do away with the messenger instead of listening to the message. Isn't that what we frequently

try to do with pain? Pain always carries some kind of message. Sometimes, however, rather than pay attention to the message, we try to kill the pain — the messenger.

Step one then on the journey to joy is to admit you have a problem that you cannot solve on your own. It is to admit that you do not know everything and that you cannot control everything. When someone tells me, “Spirituality is a crutch,” my answer is, “But who says you don’t limp?” Someone else said, “Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell; spirituality is for those who have been there.”

Step two is to recognize that there is a power, God, ready and waiting to help. Again, for many people, that’s not easy. How does a person come to know and trust God? That’s the main question I want to deal with in this sermon. There is no one way that works for everyone. God works in many and mysterious ways. The Bible says that God’s Spirit is like the wind. It cannot be controlled. It blows where it will.

Some people have to experience a taste of hell in this life before they can come to know and trust God. They have to hit bottom and be completely broken.

In the biography of Bill W., one of the founders of A.A., the author Robert Thomsen describes what had to happen to Bill W. before he came to know and trust God. Bill was in the hospital, where he had been many times before as a result of his excessive drinking. His friend Ebby stopped by for a visit and after a little general talk, again repeated his pat formula about realizing you were licked, admitting it, and being willing to turn your life over to God. Bill nodded. He was now so lost that he was willing to believe anything. He had no mind with which to argue, no energies to fight with.

When Ebby left, Bill did not get up from the side of the bed or make any move to see him out. He sat with the passivity of a six-year-old who knows he has done wrong but cannot understand what he is supposed to do.

Bill stayed in his room now, never going down the hall, often not even going to the window. Tomorrow or the following day, he would have to leave, and at this thought, a sudden chill would sweep over him; his whole body would be covered with a cold sweat. He could not go home. Out there were three choices. Only three. He could stop drinking, or he would go insane, or he would die.

Alone, lost, and terrified, he saw no place to turn. He needed — every particle of him hungered for — someone, something to tell him what to do, someone to take care of him.

Finally, unable to stay on the bed, unwilling to go down the hall and join the others, he began to pace the tiny room, from the bed to the door, from the door to the bed. He would do anything now. But what was there to do?

He knew he had to leave the hospital, but what then? What was strong enough to stop his drinking? Past experience would not do it. Willpower would not do it. His pride had always been based on what he could do. Now he knew he could do nothing. So — he halted by the foot of the bed — he was hopeless. This was his end.

Still, he would not, could not accept the word because in some far corner of his being, he did not want to die. In spite of the terror, in spite of the agony, the strain, and the unending tumult,

he wanted life more than he wanted an end to his striving. That was a belief and a desire. He wanted to live.

His hands clasped the footboard of the bed. But how? How? The cancer of alcohol had already killed his mind, his will, his spirit, and it was only a matter of time before it would kill his body. Yet at this moment, with the last vestige of pride, the last trace of obstinacy crushed out of him, still he knew he wanted to live.

His fingers relaxed a little on the footboard, his arms slowly reached out and up, “I want,” he said aloud, “I want...” He wanted to live. He would do anything, anything to be allowed to go on living.

“Oh, God,” he cried, and it was the sound not of a man, but of a trapped and crippled animal. “If there is a God, show me. Show me. Give me some sign.”

As he formed the words, in that very instant he was aware first of a light, a great white light that filled the room. Then he suddenly seemed caught up in a kind of joy, an ecstasy such as he would never find words to describe. It was as though he were standing high on a mountaintop, and a strong clear wind blew against him, through him — but it seemed a wind not of air, but of spirit — and as this happened, he had the feeling that he was stepping into another world, a new world of consciousness, and everywhere now there was a wondrous feeling of Presence, which all his life he had been seeking. Nowhere had he ever felt so complete, so satisfied, so embraced.

This happened. And it happened as suddenly and as definitely as one may receive a shock from an electrode or feel heat when a hand is placed close to a flame. Then when it passed, when the light slowly dimmed, and the ecstasy subsided — and whether this was a matter of minutes or much longer he never knew; he was beyond any reckoning of time — the sense of presence was still there about him, within him. And with it, there was still another sense — a sense of rightness. No matter how wrong things seemed to be, they were as they were meant to be.

Now in place of the light, the exaltation, he was filled with a peace such as he had never known. He had heard of people who had tried to open the universe to themselves; he had opened himself to the universe. He had heard people say there was a bit of God in everyone, but this feeling that he was a part of God, a living part of the higher power, was a new and revolutionary feeling.

Some people have to hit bottom in whatever their problem or pain is before they come to know and trust God.

And there are others who seem to be born with a knowledge and trust of God all along. I’ve known such people. They are kind, forgiving, saintly. It is as if they have always been open to the power and presence of God within them, and it shines through. They go about their lives in a quiet, helpful way. They are like the sheep in the parable of the sheep and the goats, which Jesus told. They feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who are sick and in prison, and they are surprised that they are doing anything out of the ordinary. Still, others come to know and trust God in a gradual, almost imperceptible way. They pick up a faith from their parents and friends. A few years ago, a man in another church where I was doing some consulting wanted to know the exact moment and experience that I had when I began to know and trust

God. He had had an earth-shaking conversion and seemed to think that unless others had an experience exactly the same as his, they could not know or trust God.

I asked him if he remembered as a child the exact day and hour when he was aware that his mom and dad were his mom and dad, or if he remembered the exact time he came to trust them as his parents? He said that he didn't know when it happened. It was rather a gradual and growing knowledge. I told him that it was the same for me with my parents, and also the same for me in my coming to know and trust God. My journey owes a great deal to the family in which I was raised and the church in which I grew up, and I am still learning and growing.

There are many paths in our coming to know and trust God. I only hope you are on one of them because it is a very important step in healing the hurts and overcoming the weaknesses in your life. You see, the real issue for most people is not whether there is a God. The real issue is, how can I come to know and trust God? How can God's power help me with my weakness?

Dr. M. Scott Peck writes that he came to know and trust God through the path of Zen Buddhism, but that was only the first stretch of the road. Another point along the journey of coming to know and trust God came through his reading and study of The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. That classic consists of a series of imaginary letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to Wormwood, a junior devil, who has been assigned to undermine the spiritual life of a new Christian.

At one point, Screwtape advises Wormwood to make sure that the new Christian regards "his time as his time." Peck writes that this sentence at first made no sense to him. He read it over and over while wondering if it might not be some typographical error. How could anyone think of his time except as his own? Then it dawned on Peck that the possibility existed of his time belonging to a power higher than himself. It was a discomfiting notion, and still today, he is continuing to learn to submit his time to God's ownership.

For those of us who claim to follow Jesus, one of the best ways to come to know and trust God is through the life, teachings, and example of Jesus. Once we come to know and trust God, the good news is, our weakness, our hurt, or whatever our problem is can be turned into a source of strength. That's what Paul was writing about in the scripture lesson read earlier. Once he admitted his weakness and trusted God to help, then God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul discovered that his weakness, his limitation, was a constant reminder that he was not completely self-sufficient, and once he admitted this, God's power truly flowed through him. It's as if our feeling that we can fix everything ourselves blocks God's power from working in our lives.

Many people have testified that the most spectacular answers to prayer have come following a period when they recognized that they could do nothing for themselves. More next week. Amen.