Sunday, May 29, 1994
JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 4 in a Series: Making Changes)
Romans 12:1-2

One of the best metaphors for understanding human life on this earth is to think of life as a journey, and the life of a Christian as a "journey to joy." The idea of the Christian life as a journey to joy is not new and is based on the assumption that God created us for joy. Throughout the Bible, we are taught that God's creation is good, that God seeks our good, and that God wants us to experience joy in our lives. Continuing that tradition, Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly," and one of the historic classical Christian catechisms teaches that the purpose of life is to "glorify God and enjoy God forever."

However, as with all journeys, there are starts and stops, detours, and moments when we can lose our way. We can get stuck in bad habits, or hurts, or guilt, or addictions. There are also times when we aren't aware that we are lost or addicted, and even when we realize it, there are those among us who refuse to stop and ask for help or directions. Fortunately, the Christian faith, as lived and taught by Jesus, provides guidance for life's journey to joy. Furthermore, we are promised God's help along the journey. God always travels with us, and because God travels with us, there are always some surprises.

One of the problems you will encounter on your journey to joy is that you may come to think that you can direct it all by yourself without any help from God or anyone else. But that's not the way it works. The journey to joy works only when God is doing the directing. Therefore, be willing to be surprised by forces beyond your control, and realize that a major learning on the journey to joy is the art of surrender.

Thus, the first step in the journey to joy is to admit that you are lost, stuck, addicted, caught in guilt, or have a problem that you cannot solve on your own.

The second step along the journey to joy is to recognize and believe that there is a power — God — who is ready and willing to help. Spiritual guidance is ready and available. For most people, the real issue is not whether there is a God. The real issue is, how can I come to know and trust God?

The third step in the journey to joy is to respond to the invitation of Jesus: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." For some strange reason, we human beings have difficulty letting go of our hurts and resentments, our addictions and our hang-ups, our problems and our pains. We do not want to admit that we need help. Yet, letting go is a part of our continual growth and maturity. As St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways."

The process of letting go can be painful, but it is a necessary part of our journey to joy. On this journey, there is no gain without pain.

In step three, on letting go, I especially noted that we need to let go of our resentments and hurts, and we do this best through forgiving those who have hurt us. It needs to be unconditional forgiveness — that is, we do it for our own good with no conditions attached.

Today, in step four, we're going to be considering how to make some additional changes or course corrections in our lives so that we can continue on our journey to joy. Lest you misunderstand, these changes are not necessary for God to love you and accept you. God's love for you and for me is unconditional. These changes are for your sake, not for God's sake.

Most, if not all, of you who are listening to this sermon would agree that you are not perfect, that you have some character defects, some weaknesses that you would like to change.

What I am calling step four is similar to the sixth step of the Twelve Steps in A.A., which reads, "We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."

The rest of this sermon will revolve around three basic questions: Where do such character defects or weaknesses come from? Why is it so hard to get rid of them? How do I cooperate with God in making these changes?

What is the origin of your character defects, your weaknesses? Some of them you may have inherited. For example, you may have inherited a tendency to have a hot temper. But that doesn't excuse you. You may have inherited a tendency toward certain addictions. But that doesn't give you an excuse for giving in to this tendency.

It's also possible that some of your character defects or weaknesses come from the culture — that is, the circumstances in which you were raised. We know now, for example, that abusers often come from abusive homes. But again, that's no excuse for abusing others. You may have grown up in an environment where lying and cheating were everyday occurrences, but that doesn't justify that kind of behavior. Or you may have grown up in a home where you were taught that you were unimportant.

All of us have a built-in need for security, a need for knowing that our lives count for something, for having a sense of self-worth, and if you didn't get these needs satisfied as you were growing up, you might be trying to satisfy them by surrounding yourself with all sorts of material things in an attempt to feel secure. Then, too, there are people who try to get their security by putting others down.

Let's take a short detour here and talk a little more about this matter of too many people believing that they are unimportant and have a shortage of self-worth. Dr. M. Scott Peck, in his book Further Along the Road Less Traveled, claims that what holds many people back from good mental health and even from God is the sense of their unimportance, their unloveliness, and their undesirability. He writes: "I am often amazed at how unimportant we consider ourselves to be. A decade ago, I was at a dinner party where the other guests were talking about a famous film producer and how he had left his mark on history. Suddenly, I blurted out, 'We all leave our mark on history.' And that stopped the dinner table conversation dead, as if I had said something grossly obscene."

The more I thought about Dr. Peck's observation, the more it became clear to me why so many people pay so much attention to celebrities — because they do not feel important themselves.

One reason we do not like to think of ourselves as being important is because it places a lot of responsibility on us. We like to think of people in the movies, or the leaders in government, or those who have lots of money as being important.

The truth is that God sees each one of us as being equally important. That's what Jesus taught over and over again.

Some of your character defects and weaknesses you may have inherited, and some you picked up from the culture in which you live. In addition, some of your character defects and weaknesses may have come from wrong choices that you have continually made. If you choose to do something long enough, it becomes a habit. And once it becomes a habit, you're stuck.

Why does it take so long to get rid of these things? Again, there are several reasons. First of all, when you've been doing something a long time, it's not easy to break the pattern. This can be both good and bad. If it's a good habit, then you can be thankful that habits are difficult to break; and if it's a bad habit, it takes a lot of courage and practice to break it.

The story is told about a knife thrower in a circus. Several times each day, his wife would take her place against a board, and he would throw several dozen knives, outlining her body against the backboard. After several years of doing this, he discovered that she had been unfaithful and thought it would be an easy thing to get rid of her simply by throwing a knife and, instead of missing her, hitting her. But no matter how much he tried to hit her with one of the knives and make it look like an accident, every time he threw a knife, it missed her. The habit was so well established that he could not break it.

Second, making positive changes in our lives is difficult because we tend to connect our identity with our defects. People will say, "That's just the way I am. I can't help it." Our defect or weakness then tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Your defect or weakness can become so identified with your identity that you begin to wonder if you let go of the defect or weakness, will you still be you?

Third, it's difficult for you to let go of your defects because each one has a payoff. It may be masking your pain or giving you an excuse to fail. It may compensate for the guilt in your life. Maybe it gives you a way of controlling other people in your life. There's always a payoff. You don't continue to do things unless in some way your behavior is rewarded.

How then can you cooperate with God's change process? The Apostle Paul wrote: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Here are some suggestions for helping you to cooperate with God so that you can overcome your character defects and so that your life will truly continue to be a journey to joy.

Focus on changing one defect at a time. Begin by working on the one which is damaging your life the most.

Work on changing that defect or overcoming that weakness one day at a time. Just for today, I'm going to be as loving and forgiving as possible. Just for today, I'm going to act and not react. When Jesus was teaching his disciples how to pray, he suggested that they pray—"Give us this day our daily bread," not give us this month enough bread for the month or this year; and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring troubles of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today."

Live one day at a time because we never know for sure what the next day is going to bring.

There was a rabbi who lived in a small Russian town at the turn of the century. After twenty years of pondering the very deepest religious questions and spiritual issues in life, he finally came to the conclusion that when he got right down to rock bottom, he just didn't know.

Shortly after reaching that conclusion, he was walking across the village square on his way to the synagogue to pray. The cossack, the village marshal, was in a bad mood that morning and thought he would take it out on the rabbi. So he yelled, "Hey Rabbi, where do think you're going?" The rabbi answered, "I don't know."

This infuriated the cossack even more. "What do you mean you don't know where you're going? Every morning at eleven o'clock, you have crossed this village square on the way to the synagogue to pray, and here it is eleven o'clock in the morning, and you're going in the direction of the synagogue, and you try to tell me you don't know where you're going. You're trying to make some kind of fool out of me, and I'll teach you not to do that."

So the cossack grabbed the rabbi and took him off to the local jail. And just as he was about to throw him into the cell, the rabbi turned to him and commented, "You see, you just don't know."

Focus on God's power, not your own power. Over and over again, Jesus taught that we human beings are not in ultimate total control. Once you accept the fact that you are not in absolute control of your life, it is then that you open up the possibility of being changed with the help of God's power. The removal of character defects rarely happens all of a sudden in one dramatic moment.
Remember above all, God loves you just as much on your bad days as on your good days. This in itself gives you the freedom to change. One person wrote, "I was a neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish. Everyone kept telling me to change. I resented them, and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. What hurt the most was that, like the others, my best friend kept insisting that I change. So I felt powerless and trapped. Then one day, another friend said to me, 'Don't change. I love you just as you are.' These words were music to my ears: 'Don't change. Don't change... I love you just as you are.' I relaxed, I came alive. And then I began to change. Now I know that I couldn't change until I found someone who would love me whether I changed or not."

It is God's unconditional love for us that gives us the power to change. Amen.