Sunday, June 5, 1994
THE JOURNEY TO JOY (No. 5 in a Series: Maintaining Momentum)
Romans 8:28-38; II Timothy 4:7

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

For the past several weeks, we've been exploring the metaphor of the Christian life as a "Journey to Joy." Like all journeys, there are starts and stops, times when we move quickly, and times when our momentum fades. There are unexpected detours, and we can lose our way. Some of us have difficulty admitting when we are lost, and because we don't stop to ask for directions, our lives can get into all kinds of trouble.

As Christians, we believe that God always travels with us on our journey through life and that God is ready and willing to give us guidance when we are open to it, if we are willing to let God help direct our lives. When we allow God to direct us, then life truly becomes a journey to joy. After all, God created us for joy.

We've been thinking about this journey to joy in terms of a series of steps or stages along the way. The first step is to admit that you are lost, stuck, addicted, or weighed down by guilt or a problem that you cannot solve on your own.

The second step on the journey to joy is to believe and recognize that there is a power — God — who is ready and willing to help. God's guidance is always available, at all times and in all places. For most people, the issue isn't whether there is a God. The real issue is, "How can I better come to know and trust God?"

The third step on your journey to joy is to respond to the invitation of God as given through Jesus: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." One of the biggest obstacles we human beings face is our difficulty in letting go so that we can trust God.

The fourth step is to acknowledge that throughout life's journey to joy, we frequently need course corrections. We need to keep making changes in our lives. We are not perfect. Spiritual growth is never smooth. It tends to be jagged, with ups and downs. We take two steps forward and then one step back. We stumble and fall. We fall back into self-defeating patterns. We continue to make mistakes. We tend to repeat the patterns of our past. It's easy to slip back into old habits, old hang-ups, and old addictions. We continue to need God's guidance and forgiveness. Just when we think we are safe, new weaknesses can enter our lives when we least expect them.

Today, we are considering the fifth step on the journey to joy. It is the step of maintaining our momentum, which includes how to avoid and overcome the relapses that occur in all journeys.

In one of his many books, Harry Emerson Fosdick tells about a character in the New Testament whose name is mentioned only three times, and then very briefly. His name is Demas, and some of us are more like him than we might care to admit.

We first meet Demas in Paul's letter to Philemon, where Paul mentions him briefly as a co-worker in the church, along with Mark, Luke, and Aristarchus. From what little we know, Demas was a devoted and promising disciple who was on the journey to joy.

The second time his name is mentioned is in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Again, he is mentioned along with Luke, the beloved physician. However, reading between the lines, we see that Demas is not quite as promising a disciple as he first seemed. His spiritual life is losing momentum.

The third time Demas is mentioned is in the second letter to Timothy, in one of perhaps the last paragraphs Paul ever wrote. Now Paul says of Demas, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Here is the story of an individual who made a fine beginning but could not maintain his momentum. He fell back into his old ways.

I meet so many people who look back on their lives and shake their heads with regret, saying, "Why did I quit when I had such a good start? Where did I lose momentum?" Some of you who are listening may be saying to yourselves, "I wish I hadn't quit on God. I made a commitment years ago to walk with God in my life, and I was doing it. The presence of God was an active power and joy in my life. But then, after a while, I began to take God for granted. I let down on my spiritual disciplines, my regular times of prayer. I used to be faithful in my participation in public worship, and then other things crowded that out. Now God seems far away."

What can you do about it? How can you maintain momentum on your journey to joy?

First of all, it is important to remember that relapses for most people occur in a fairly predictable pattern and have common causes. For example, you can become complacent. You get comfortable with short-term gains. You start saying to yourself that you don't need anyone's help, including God's. You convince yourself that you can handle all life's problems and temptations on your own. Or the pain in your life is reduced enough that you convince yourself you can live with that amount of reduced pain. You tell yourself that you don't need to attend the recovery group anymore. You don't need to work the steps. You don't need God's help or anyone else's. You don't need to practice the presence of God. You don't need to pray regularly.

A second contributor to a relapse is confusion. You start rationalizing and telling yourself your problem wasn't so bad after all. You go on to tell yourself that you could've handled the problem all by yourself.

A third contributor to a relapse is compromise. You go back to the place of temptation, whether it be a bar, a party, or some other environment where you will be tested before you are ready. It's like the compulsive gambler saying to his wife, "Let's go to Las Vegas. We'll just see the shows." You start compromising. And then, inevitably, comes catastrophe, where you give in to your former bad habit.

Why do we fall back? The major cause is excessive pride. We come to trust too much in our own willpower. Remember, step one was to admit that you were powerless on your own, and in step two, you came to trust God. After a while, you convince yourself that it's your power that overcame your addiction. You tell yourself that you are all-powerful and all-knowing and that you can handle any problem, no matter how big, all on your own. Our pride gets in the way. The Bible says, "Pride goes before a fall." The fact is, God has made us so that we need each other. We are interdependent. We all need the support of God and other people. Sure, religion is a crutch, but who says you don't limp?

Another reason we fall back into our old ways is because we begin to ignore one of the steps on the journey to joy. We get in a hurry. We want to move through the steps too quickly, or we want to skip a particularly difficult step. The truth is, there is no quick fix. You didn't get into your mess overnight, and it's not going to end with one dramatic change.

What, then, can you do in a positive way to prevent a relapse? What are some of the preventive measures you can take to maintain your momentum on your life's journey to joy?

The first one is to practice daily the presence of God in your life. Our Christian faith teaches us over and over again that God is always with us. In fact, you cannot escape God, but you can ignore God. You can live as if God is not a part of your life.

You've heard me illustrate this point before by saying the power and energy of God are somewhat like the radio waves that fill the air all around us. These waves are always present when a station is broadcasting them, but you are unaware of them unless you have a receiver to tune them in. The other day, I was on an elevator with a man who had a portable cellular phone, and I asked him if he could receive calls in the elevator. He said, "Of course." God's presence is like that. It is always there. The problem is not finding God — as C.S. Lewis observed, "To speak of our search for God is like speaking of the mouse's search for the cat." The problem is not finding God, but allowing ourselves to be found by God.

Practicing the presence of God means doing those things that continue to make you sensitive to God's presence.

When Jesus was with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified, he said to them, "Watch and pray so that you do not enter into temptation."

What are some of the things that will keep you sensitive and open to God's presence and power in your life?

The most important is gratitude. St. Paul wrote in the New Testament that most of the malignancies that cramp the human spirit come from a lack of gratitude. He said, "Although they knew God... they did not give thanks to God." Karl Barth wrote that gratitude is the one thing that is unconditionally and inescapably demanded of us. Nothing in the world keeps us more sensitive and open to the presence and power of God in our lives than simple gratitude.

Note especially that the kind of gratitude Jesus talked about is not dependent on what we have or don't have. It's not a matter of taking inventory. Unfortunately, we've frequently been led to believe that the opposite is true — that the more we have, the more grateful we will be.

To put it another way, one of the most widespread barriers to developing the character quality of gratitude is the "can you top this" syndrome. We seem to think that only if this year is better than the last — then we will be grateful.

If you want to maintain momentum on your journey to joy, practice gratitude every day. You can do this not only by saying "thank you" to the many people who are part of your life each day, but also with short prayers of thanksgiving to God throughout the day. It has been said that "thanks" is the only necessary prayer. Just a thought of thanksgiving is a prayer in itself. Practicing gratitude is a spiritual exercise that will keep you open to God and others.

In addition to practicing gratitude daily, another help in maintaining momentum on your journey to joy is to remind yourself daily of the fundamental goodness of God and of the fact that God is on the journey to joy with you, and so are countless others — which is why being part of a church community is so crucial. God never meant for us to be on life's journey alone.

Above all, remember what St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.... If God is for us, who is against us? For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." No wonder Paul could write, as he neared the end of his journey to joy, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

I hope each one of you can make that statement at your life's end. Amen.