Sunday June 5, 1994

THE JOURNEY TO JOY, The Fifth Step, Maintaining Momentum

No.5 in a series Romans 8:28-38, II Timothy 4:7

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

We've been considering for these past several weeks the metaphor for the Christian life as a "Journey to Joy." I've noted that as with all journeys there are starts and stops, and there are also times when we're able to move faster and there are slowdowns when our momentum seems to fade. As with all journeys, there are

unexpected detours and we can lose our way. Some of us have difficulty in admitting that we are lost and therefore do not stop and ask for directions and 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 furthermore 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 is 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 or stuck or 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 ready and available at all times and in all places. For most people the issue is not, is there 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 and letting go so that we can trust God.

The fourth step is to acknowledge that through-

out life's journey to joy we frequently need course corrections. We need always to be 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 hangups, 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 which occur in all journeys.

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

We first meet Demas in the New Testament in Paul's letter to Philemon. There Paul mentions him briefly as being 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. Reading between the lines, however, Demas is not quite as promising a disciple as it first seemed. He is beginning to fade. 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 of 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 and say,

"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 yourself, "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. 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 and now God seems far away.

What can I 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 predict-

able 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 the help of God. You can handle all life's problems and temptations on your own. Or the pain in your life is reduced enough so that you convince yourself that you can live with that amount of reduced pain. You tell yourself that you don't need to attend the recovery group any more. You don't need to work the steps. You don't need God's help or the help of anyone. 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 or a party or some other kind of 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 catastrophy 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 our own will power. 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 so 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 preventative measures you can take in order 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 ignore God. You can live as if God is not a part of your life.

You have heard me illustrate this point before by saying the power and energy of God is 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 how we let ourselves be found by God.

Practicing the presence of God means doing those things which 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 the 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 which 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 a 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, a second 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 a part of a church community is so crucial. God never meant 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.