Sunday June 12, 1994

JOURNEY TO JOY, Recyling Your Pain

6th in a series Matthew 5:1-12

The best and most concise summary of Jesus' teachings is to be found in what we call the Sermon on the Mount, which is written down in the Gospel of Matthew in chapters 5, 6, and 7. As recorded by the writer of Matthew, this summary of the teachings of Jesus begins with a series of statements which we know as the "beatitudes."

In many English translations these verses begin with the word, "blessed," for example, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," while yet other newer translations use

the word "happy," "Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

There are some striking similarities between these "beatitudes" and what I've been calling the "steps on the journey to joy." This is more than a coincidence because as Christians we believe that on our life journey, God travels with us and we live our lives most joyfully and constructively when we follow God's direction. For those of us who are Christians, most of this direction from God comes through the life, example and teachings of Jesus. In addition we honor and respect the Jewish heritage from which Jesus came. From that heritage Jesus learned and we learn that God has created us for joy and that creation is a blessing.

We began this sermon series by noting that a useful metaphor for understanding human life in God's creation is to see it as a journey and for the Christian it is to be a "journey to joy," and this involves a series of steps or stages.

The first step on the journey to joy is to recognize and admit that you need help on your life's journey. To be more specific, we all encounter problems on our journey through life. Sometimes you get lost, or you have a problem or a habit or an addiction which is too big for you to handle on your own. God did not create you to travel life's journey alone.

This first step is strikingly similar to the first beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed or happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the king-

dom of heaven." A paraphrase of this beatitude is, "happy are those who know they are spiritually poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." To put it another way, "happy are those who are willing to admit they need help. Blessed are those who have the courage to ask for help when they need it. Blessed are those who know they are not God. Happy are those who know they need God."

The second beatitude is: "Blessed or happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." The second step on the journey to joy I described as "finding help for your hurt." Blessed are those who in their trouble, ask God for help. They will be comforted.

The third beautitude is: "Blessed or happy are

those who are meek, for they will inherit the earth." We often misunderstand the word meek and think of a meek person as being weak, or shy, or withdrawn. However a more accurate definition of a meek person is someone who is under control. Other synonyms for "meek" are calm, forbearing, patient, humble and gentle. Meekness means having strength under control.

Being meek in this sense connects to the third step on the journey to joy which is learning to trust God, letting God take control of your life. Once you do this, you have a calmness and a patience and humility and a quiet strength. "Blessed are the meek."

The fourth step on the journey to joy is to continue to make changes in your life, course correc-

tions. The fourth beatitude states: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled." Learning and changing are a continuous process throughout life. There is always new knowledge to be gained. You can teach an old dog new tricks. The search for truth never ends. As we hunger and thirst for righteousness we all have important contributions to make. Never think of your life as being unimportant. God made you for a purpose.

The fifth step on the journey to joy is maintaining momentum, overcoming the relapses that occur, finding ways to keep yourself spiritually sensitive and open to God's direction.

We all have the tendency to fall back into our bad habits and our old ways. We are always tempted

to think we can live this life without any help from God or from others.

This fifth step connects with the sixth beatitude as taught by Jesus. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." The best way to maintain spiritual momentum is to practice gratitude daily and to remind yourself daily of God's goodness. The more you do this, the more pure in heart you become and the more conscious you become of God's power and presence in your life. "Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

Today in the final sermon in this series, we are considering the sixth step on the journey to joy. I'm calling it, "Recycling Your Pain." It relates to the fifth beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." As I've said before, the

sequence of these step or stages on the journey to joy is not rigid. In your life, step two might come after step three, or step four after step five. In the same way, Jesus did not mean to suggest a rigid sequence in his listing of the Beatitudes.

The simplest way to understand this sixth step on recycling your pain is to recognize that God wants you to use your experiences to help other people. With God's help you can recycle the pain in your life so that it is a benefit to you and to other people. God can use your weaknesses and your pain to help others. Now that's good news.

Dr. M. Scott Peck in his book, FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, says: "The quickest way to change your attitude toward pain is to

accept the fact that everything that happens to us has been designed for our spiritual growth." Notice that Peck says "our" spiritual growth. Our pain can be recyled to help others, indeed our pain is meant to be recycled to help others.

The test as to whether or not you are truly on a journey to joy and continuing on that journey is when you begin to focus outside yourself, when you begin to be merciful, to practice mercy toward others. "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

One of the most memorable parables that Jesus told illustrates this truth. It is often called the parable of the sheep and the goats and is found in Matthew 25. "One day," Jesus said, "God will say to the righteous, 'Come you that are blessed,

inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will ask, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And God will answer, 'Truly as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy."

Today we're going to be considering two questions: why does God allow my pain? And how can I use my pain to help others?

1. First of all, God allows your pain because God has created you with a free will. Therefore your life and the life of every human being is filled with choices and decisions. You can choose good or bad, right or wrong, and so can everyone else. As I said in a previous sermon, you can allow God to help you direct your life or you can ignore God.

Free will is both a blessing and a burden. Sometimes we make dumb choices and sometimes the dumb choices of others have a bad effect on us. Here's a person who chooses to drink and drive and as a result has an accident which harms

other people. You can choose to experiment with drugs and if you become addicted, it's your fault.

2. Although God doesn't cause the pain and suffering in your life, God can use it to get your attention. Pain is a messenger, it's a warning light, it's a signal. Pain is not the enemy.

God can also use your pain to remind you to depend on God. Pain can be a powerful teacher. Some people seem to learn only through pain.

Most important of all, pain can prepare you to serve, to reach out to others. It can give you empathy. That's the reason for the success of most support groups. Who can best help someone to go through the pain of the loss of a child

than another person who has gone through the same pain? When that person says, "I understand somewhat what you are going through," he or she is telling the truth. It's not an empty statement.

Who can better help someone deal with the pain of abuse than someone who has also been abused and has come through the pain? Who can better help someone who has lost her job than someone who has had the same experience? God can use or recyle the pain in your life to help others whether it be minor pain or major pain.

Do you remember the story of Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis? There was a lot of jealousy between

Joseph and his brothers. One day his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt and then told their father that he had been killed and eaten by a lion. In Egypt he rises to a high position in the Egyptian court and is falsely accused of trying to rape his master's wife and is thrown into pris-on.Because Joseph was open to God's direction in his life, God used the misfortunes of Joseph to later save his own family and also to save the Egyptians from starvation. Later Joseph could say, "They intended to harm me, but God used it all for the good." Our faith tells us that God never wastes a hurt. But you can waste it.

Now let's be more specific. What are some things you need to do so that you can use your pain to help others? First, you need to be clear in your own mind what you have learned from

your pain. Think about your own life journey. How has God's power helped you? What kind of pain or suffering have you personally gone through? How have you changed or how are you now changing because of that pain and suffering and how is God more a part of your everyday life? In what ways can your story help others?

Second, you need to be humble in your willingness to help. Remember all of us are always on the journey to joy. We never have all the answers, but through our pain and with God's direction, we have learned some things which can be helpful to others. Someone described this kind of humility as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

Third, be honest about your hurts and your faults. Do not be afraid to admit that on your journey you have frequently stumbled, gotten lost and sometimes were too proud to ask for directions. You help other people the most when you are honest about your own struggles. The bonus is that when you tell your story, it not only gives help to another but it continues to help you in your own healing. Every time you tell your story in a honest and open way, you get a little stronger. Every time you are merciful, you gain mercy.

Above all in telling your story, don't lecture, don't be judgmental. You are a witness, not a prosecuting attorney.

Fourth, keep your own spiritual energy replen-

ished. Let God's power continue to flow through you. To do that you need to be regular in your own spiritual disciplines. When your own spiritual tank is empty you have little or nothing to give to others.

As I conclude this sermon series, I want you above all to remember that God created you for a purpose. When you allow God to direct your life and seek God's will, life can be a journey to joy. Remember too, that happiness is a choice. The one freedom that no one can take from you unless you willingly give it up, is the attitude you have toward the circumstances in your life. Amen.