Sunday, February 12, 1995
WEEPING AND LAUGHING
Luke 6:17-26

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

William Willimon, in his book And the Laugh Shall Be First, writes: “Among all of God’s creatures, human beings are the only animals who both laugh and weep — for we are the only ones who are struck with the difference between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In those priceless moments when we are struck with the incongruity of this world, humor results. A stern, smug gentleman slips on a banana peel and ends up sprawled on the sidewalk; W.C. Fields throws a pie in the face of a haughty woman in an evening gown; a mischievous peasant puts the cruel landlord in his place — we laugh.”

“In those moments when the human situation is exposed, when the so-deadly-serious ones are made to look like fools, Christians sing with Mary before us that such fun is the divine result of a God who ‘has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts...has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree.'”

Weeping seems to be the opposite of laughing, but according to Jesus, they go together — they are connected. He said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

Jesus was familiar with weeping in a very personal way. As he was preparing to enter the holy city of Jerusalem prior to the final week of his life, Luke writes, “And when Jesus drew near and saw the city, he wept over it saying, ‘Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.'” We are also told that when he received the news of the death of Lazarus, one of his close friends, he wept. And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Or as another translation has it, “Happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort.”

Notice the paradoxical connection: the truly happy persons are those who mourn, those who know the meaning of sadness and grief. They will find comfort beyond their imagination. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

So today, we are going to examine weeping and laughing as followers of Christ and human beings, and how they go together. To begin with, lest you misunderstand the connection between weeping and laughing, note that there are some kinds of mourning or weeping or grief that do not produce happiness, comfort, or laughter. There are destructive types of mourning as well as redemptive mourning. It is weeping without hope.

Listen to this man’s story. In one year, he lost a son in the war, and he grieved. There was a second son who refused to come back home and enter business with his father, and the old man grieved. The father could not understand all the integration and civil rights activity, and he grieved. His way of looking at the world was so settled and pat that when it began to come apart, he mourned. He had no hope. Any kind of change threatened him. He wanted everything always to remain the same.

Here’s another similar story. In one year, this man’s brother committed suicide, and that same brother’s wife died unexpectedly six weeks later of cancer. Another brother died in a faraway place, and he mourned. His oldest daughter moved to another state — far away — because

she could not tolerate her father's domination, and he grieved. Another daughter got a divorce, and he grieved. And then his youngest son ran away from college with a young woman from the wrong side of the tracks, and he grieved. Is it any wonder that this individual was a bundle of resentments? Is it any wonder that he was so critical of the world, the church, and everything he saw and touched? He never was able to see his own part in any of this. He thought everything in life had to go according to his will, and when it didn't, he grieved. Unresolved grief or mourning can choke a person to death. There is a kind of mourning that makes one bitter. This is not the kind of mourning that Jesus was describing.

Then there are the professional mourners, those who seem to be always weeping, perpetually and habitually. There is no joy in this world for them anywhere. They are negative thinkers who always see the bad and never the good. These are the people who complain and grieve about everything. They are never happy or pleased. They are unable to rejoice at anyone's good fortune. "Professional complainers" might be a better term than mourners. These are the people who say you can't trust anyone. They are suspicious of any change in the status quo. The forces of evil are always on the verge of taking over the world.

This is not the kind of weeping Jesus had in mind when he said, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." By weeping, he did not mean a continual preoccupation with one's own troubles. He was not talking about people who are all the time depressed. There are destructive kinds of weeping.

Sometimes, too, weeping can be hypocritical or misplaced. One of the persons in charge of a Nazi death camp during the Second World War, where thousands of Jews were put in gas chambers, had no sadness or remorse about his daily work, but wept bitterly when his pet parakeet died.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Blessed are those who have honest emotions. Blessed are those who can experience grief and sorrow as well as joy and laughter. To be able to cry, to shed tears for the right reasons, is to be blessed. Why? Because to be able to experience sadness is also to be able to experience joy. It is a demonstration that we are connected with one another. Those persons who are cold, emotionless, unfeeling, and uncaring are also those who can never be comforted because they can never admit they need comfort of any kind.

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." That's what St. Paul wrote to the members of the congregation in Rome. Blessed and happy are those who can feel the joy and pain of others because then they can experience joy and pain themselves.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." The weeping that is being described here is redemptive. It's the kind of mourning that changes us and brings about changes for the better in society. It's the kind of mourning that makes us more caring, loving, understanding, and sensitive people. It's the kind of sorrow and sadness that makes us stop, ponder, and wonder, and then work to change everything around us for the better. This kind of weeping comes from and leads to compassionate caring.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." When Jesus wept as he came to Jerusalem, he was weeping for the false religious values that he saw in that city. He wept because people would not understand or accept God's love for them. He wept because he knew that many people believed that if they got rid of Jesus the troublemaker, peace would

again be theirs. He wept because of his love for his nation and its capital, Jerusalem, and he could see it all coming apart.

Some of you who are here today or listening on the radio or watching on television can remember back to 1963, when as individuals and as a nation we mourned the death by assassination of President John Kennedy. It didn't matter whether or not we voted for him or whether we agreed with his policies or even if we liked him or not. We were mourning for more than an individual. Our deep sadness was over the fact that in our nation, we try to solve too many problems by killing someone. The same mistaken idea was at work when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed and when someone tried to kill President Reagan. Hopefully, that kind of weeping is redemptive. Like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, we think, as he said, "Would that even today we knew the things that make for peace."

There's a power in this kind of weeping. When my older brother and I were growing up, like most siblings of the same sex and fairly close in age, we fought physically with each other a great deal. Our mother was often at her wit's end as to what to do. Many times, she would be so upset because of her fear that we would hurt each other, that all she could do was cry. That, more than anything else she could do, would stop our fighting.

The Spanish philosopher, Unamuno, wrote, "I am convinced that we should solve many things if we all went into the streets and uncovered our griefs, which perhaps would prove to be but one sole common grief, and joined together in weeping about them and crying aloud to the heavens and calling upon God...The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which people go to weep in common. It is not enough to cure the plague; we must learn to weep for it. Yes, we must learn to weep!"

Discipleship begins when a person mourns for his or her own sins; the healing of a nation begins when the people of God mourn together for the sins of the country.

I feel sorry for the man or woman who can't cry. I also feel sorry for the man or woman who can't laugh. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Weeping and laughter are connected. They go together. They are two ends of the same continuum.

Now let's examine the laughter part of that connection. As babies, we cry, smile, and laugh before we talk. All of us know how much of a fuss we make over the first time the baby smiles and then laughs, and how hard we work to get the baby to smile and laugh. We know instinctively the importance of good humor and laughter.

A sense of humor and laughter are gifts from God and enemies of evil. Joy, fun, and laughter are built into the creation. The creation is filled with joy and happiness. Every new springtime breaks forth into a gaiety of flowering meadows and sparkling streams. All of us know the fun and joy of good human relationships. When good friends are together, even the smallest witticism produces laughter, and this is because the joke itself is not the basic cause, but rather the joy of being together.

Laughter, fun, humor, festivity — all are a part of the goodness of God's creation. There is even a comic side to nature. A row of penguins looks for all the world like a line of men in tuxedos. Upon seeing a camel for the first time, a child said, "I don't believe it." George Buttrick said that no somber God could ever have made a bullfrog or a giraffe.

Laughter can keep us from taking life, ourselves, and even our religion too seriously. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against being so grim, gloomy, and self-righteous, especially in our religious practices. He said, “And when you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites.”

Whenever we become self-righteous, pompous, know-it-alls, we need to be put in our place. People who like to think of themselves as so serious about justice, so concerned about the attainment of righteousness, are often guilty of taking themselves too seriously. Jesus said, “They see only the speck in another person’s eye, but do not see the log in their own eye.” Reinhold Niebuhr said somewhere that the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously.

If the very essence of sin is to take ourselves too seriously, then the very essence of grace is to receive the gift of laughter, especially when it comes after weeping.

It is no accident that both revolutionaries and tyrants are noted for their lack of humor. Dictatorships and totalitarian governments, and the people who lead them, see humor and laughter as their enemies. The tyrant cannot tolerate any suggestion that he or she is not invincible, omnipotent, and makes no mistakes. The revolutionary cannot stand the possibility that perhaps the revolution is filled with a variety of mixed motives and that the results of the revolution will never be pure but will be as mixed as the tyranny the revolution seeks to overthrow. Humor puts down the mighty from their thrones.

In the Bible, we are told that God laughs at the wicked because God foresees their downfall. God knows they can’t win in the long run. Laughter reminds us that the world and this life should not be taken with ultimate or final seriousness. Only God deserves that kind of attention.

Do not misunderstand. Laughter is not the opposite of seriousness and dedication. Nor is laughter the opposite of weeping. The opposite of both laughter and weeping is resignation — giving up, living without hope. Both weeping and laughing are the music of the soul. They can harmonize spirit and body.

As Christians, we can weep and be sad, but not forever. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” We can laugh and be joyful because life, despite its sadness and tragedy, is ultimately in God’s care. “Be of good cheer,” said Jesus, “for I have overcome the world.” Amen.