Sunday, January 8, 2006
GOD IS PLEASED
Mark 1:4-11

God is pleased! The story of the baptism of Jesus in Mark's gospel ends with this remarkable statement: "As Jesus was coming out of the water, he felt God's spirit descending on him like a dove, and he heard a voice assuring him, 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.'"

I have never been one to make New Year's resolutions, but in this new year of 2006, I resolve to frequently tell my children, grandchildren, co-workers, friends, and others I encounter how pleased I am with them. I encourage you to make the same resolution. It will be one of the most powerful gifts you can give. In the many years I have counseled people who share their problems, one persistent theme stands out: they have rarely heard words of encouragement or compliments from their parents, co-workers, teachers, or others. Instead, all they have heard are criticisms and words of displeasure. One man said to me, "I never heard my father say to me that he was pleased or delighted to have me as his son. All he ever did was find fault. It almost seemed like he regretted that I was born."

Many of these same people also tell me that their experience in church has left them feeling like God is not pleased with them. They come away from worship services feeling burdened rather than uplifted. Instead of prayers of thanksgiving, they hear prayers begging for mercy.

They need to hear that God is pleased with them. This is one of the central themes of the Bible. God takes pleasure in creation. In the first creation story in Genesis, the phrase "And God saw that it was good" is repeated over and over. When human beings are made in God's image, the statement is elevated: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

God is pleased. Not only with creation but also with you. The baptism of Jesus tells you that God is not only pleased with the world but also with individual lives. Amazing! Unfortunately, in too much religious language, the words "God" and "pleasure" are not often connected positively.

In 1981, the Academy Award-winning film Chariots of Fire was released. One of the main characters, Eric Liddell, ran for Great Britain in the Olympics after World War I. He was the son of missionaries in China and was deeply religious, as was his sister Jenny. The year Eric was scheduled to run in the Olympics was the same year his family needed him to help in China. In Jenny's mind, the decision was clear: of course, he would answer God's call to serve as a missionary. After all, what was more important — running for personal glory or serving God?

The decision was more complex for Eric. It wasn't "either/or." He cared for his parents and fully intended to help in China after the Olympics. Trying to explain the importance of this opportunity to his sister, he said, "Jenny, Jenny, God made me fast, and when I run, I feel God's pleasure."

He ran. He ran in his own unusual way — arms flailing, head back, mouth open, hair blowing in the wind. He ran wholeheartedly, with nothing held back. He said, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure." That is positive Christian faith. He wasn't running for his own glory but for the glory

of God. When you live wholeheartedly, using the gifts God has given you, you are enhancing and experiencing God's pleasure. God is pleased.

Years ago, I attended the funeral of a beloved teacher. He had inspired countless young men and women in his public school classroom. He loved teaching, he loved his students, and he took pride in their accomplishments. At his funeral, the minister said, "He lived with all the stops pulled out. He knew the pleasure of God." I can hear God saying to this teacher the same words spoken to Jesus: "With you, I am well pleased."

I believe that each one of you has experienced the pleasure of God at some point in your life. Maybe you didn't recognize it at the time, but it was there. It's almost impossible to make it through childhood without experiencing God's pleasure, though you might not have described it that way. Perhaps that's because the word "pleasure" is often misunderstood. For too many people, religious faith is seen as serious business, leaving little room for fun, laughter, or enjoyment.

Some people are overly serious about their religion. They live with the fear that someone, somewhere, might be having fun, and they resent it. They're afraid of genuinely experiencing pleasure. One of the main purposes of the church is to remind you that creation is good and that God is pleased.

Not all pleasure is the same, though. The pleasure the Bible describes is different from "manufactured" pleasure or "negative" pleasure.

Manufactured pleasure is false. It wears you out. When I was in college, much of this pleasure involved the overuse of alcohol, followed by terrible hangovers. Manufactured pleasure often relies on canned humor, superficial amusement, or buying more and more stuff. It promises satisfaction but never delivers and is always self-centered.

Negative pleasure, on the other hand, is the pleasure you get when someone you dislike suffers misfortune. The Germans have a word for it: schadenfreude, or taking pleasure in others' suffering. It's the pleasure that sells tabloid newspapers with headlines about celebrities' downfalls. It's also found in people who believe God loves them more than others because they follow the rules or hold the "right" beliefs. Their pleasure comes from feeling superior, convinced that others will face punishment while they themselves are rewarded.

Jesus taught that true pleasure comes from going the extra mile simply because it's the right thing to do. You might discover God's pleasure while singing in the choir, helping a friend clean up after a flood, or being a Stephen Minister, a Sunday School teacher, or a friend to someone who has no one. You experience God's pleasure when you rejoice in the good fortune of others.

There will be times, however, when discovering true pleasure is difficult. Maintaining a strong belief in the goodness of creation doesn't always come easily. A young man from the community once called me, struggling with his belief in God and the goodness of life. He said he wanted to believe but couldn't reconcile the pain and suffering he saw in the world with the idea of a good God. I told him I shared his confusion about the existence of evil and suffering, but I was equally amazed by the overwhelming goodness I've seen in people and in life itself.

I am convinced that, like that young man, all of you want to experience the pleasure of creation's goodness. You want the assurance that God is pleased with you. A young woman

once said to me, “I want to know that I am loved, even when everything around me says I’m not.” She continued, “I know it’s the testimony of the Christian faith that God’s Spirit is always in and around us, but why does it seem to come and go?”

I especially love the image in the baptism story of God’s Spirit descending “like a dove.” It’s a beautiful metaphor. It suggests that discovering God’s pleasure is a matter of being open to the Spirit in your life. Too many people search for the Spirit in exotic places or unusual religious movements, only to miss it at home in their everyday lives. The Spirit of God descends like a dove, but they miss it.

Remember, Jesus said, “The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you and among you.” He also said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.”

A few weeks ago, you celebrated Christmas, a story that reminds you to discover God in the ordinary. The shepherds and wise men found God’s goodness in a baby. When Jesus was an adult, he rediscovered the Spirit of God in his life, not through a momentous event but through the quiet image of a dove descending. It reminds me of the story of Elijah, who, in the darkest time of his life, discovered God not in the earthquake or fire, but in a “still small voice"—the silent assurance that God was with him.

All these stories in the Bible are about knowing that God is pleased with you and with creation. It’s the assurance that life can be good, even when everything seems all wrong. It’s not about a magic cure that instantly makes everything okay. Knowing God is pleased means knowing that life is a blessing, that you are loved.

Knowing that God is pleased doesn’t cure all your cancers, make your children or grandchildren into winners, or guarantee success. It means you can look at the reality of life, with all its sadness and unfairness, and still know deep inside that life is good. You know that it’s good to be alive and to be a part of creation.

Here are my suggestions for the new year: Don’t be afraid to experience the fact that God is pleased with you. Don’t be afraid to enjoy creation and life itself. Live with all the stops pulled out. If you have children or grandchildren, tell them regularly that you are pleased with them. Tell your friends and co-workers as well. Remember, life is good — be happy now, and let it go. Amen.