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 2006, I resolve to frequently tell my children, my grandchildren, co-workers, friends and others with whom I am associated, 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 almost 50 years of ministry during which I have counseled with numerous people who tell me their problems, one of the most persistent themes has been that they have never had words of encouragement or compliments given to them by their parents, co-workers, teachers and others. All they have heard have been criticisms, words of displeasure. One man said to me, "I never heard my father say to me that he was pleased, that he was delighted that I was his son. All he did was find fault. It almost seemed to me that he was sorry that I was born."

Many of these same individuals also tell me that what they have heard in church has been mostly sermons and prayers that convince them that God is not pleased with them. They come away from church worship services

believing they are miserable sinners and that there is no health in them. Instead of prayers of thanksgiving, they hear prayers begging for mercy.

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

God is pleased. God is pleased with the creation. And now the baptism of Jesus story tells you that God not

only is pleased with Jesus, but also with you and me. Amazing! Unfortunately in too much religious language, the words "God" and "pleasure" are not often connected in a positive way.

In 1981, the Academy Award winning film was ***CHARIOTS OF FIRE.*** One of the main characters in the story was Eric Liddell who ran for Great Britain in the Olympics after World War I. Eric was the son of missionaries in China and was very religious as was his sister Jenny. The year Eric was scheduled to run in the Olympics happened to be the same year he was needed to help his parents in China. In his sister's mind, there was no decision. Of course he would answer God's call to serve as a missionary. After all, which was more important, to run in a race for one's own glory or to serve

the glory of God?

The decision was more complex for Eric. It wasn't "either/or." He cared for his parents and respected what they were doing and he fully intended to help in China after the Olympics. Trying to explain to his sister the importance of this opportunity and his running, 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 whole-heartedly with nothing held back. He said, "When I run I feel God's pleasure." That's good, positive Christian faith. He was saying that when he ran, he ran not for his own glory, but for the glory of God.

And when you live in the same way, whole-heartedly, nothing held back, doing your best, developing and using the gifts God has given you in a positive way, you are enhancing and experiencing God's pleasure and you are giving glory to God. God is pleased.

I remember years ago attending a funeral for a friend of mine. This man had been a beloved teacher in the public schools and had used his abilities to inspire countless young men and women. He was energetic. He loved teaching. He loved the young people in his classes. He took pride and pleasure in the accomplishments of his students. 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 words Jesus

heard, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

I believe that each one of you hearing or reading this sermon has known the pleasure of God at some point in your life. Maybe you didn't recognize it but it was there. It's almost impossible to make it through childhood without experiencing God's pleasure, although you might not have described it using the words, "God's pleasure." That's because the word "pleasure" can easily be misunderstood. It's also because, as I mentioned earlier, some expressions of the Christian faith downplay the significance of human pleasure and God's pleasure. For too many people the practice of religious faith always has to be serious. There's no room for fun, laughter, and enjoyment.

There are people, and many of them claim to be religious, who live with the fear that someone, somewhere might be having fun and they resent it. Such people are afraid of genuinely experiencing pleasure. One of the main purposes of the church is to remind you that creation is good, and God is pleased.

Lest you misunderstand, it needs to be noted that not all pleasure has the same value. The kind of pleasure the Bible describes is different from two other varieties of pleasure. One can be defined as "manufactured"pleasure and the other as "negative" pleasure.

Manufactured pleasure is false. It always wears you out. When I was in college, there was a lot of manufactured pleasure and a lot of it involved the overuse of alcohol.

Students would get what they called "fall down" drunk. The hangover was terrible. Another kind of manufactured pleasure relies on canned humor, laugh tracks and making fun of others. It can involve the temporary pleasure of buying more and more stuff. Manufactured pleasure promises a satisfaction it can never deliver. It is always self-centered.

Manufactured pleasure is concerned with feeling good artificially. It is focused on sensation and immediacy. It often takes the form of drug induced pleasure.

The second category of false pleasure is negative pleasure. This is the pleasure you experience when someone you envy or dislike gets into trouble or fails. The German word is "schadenfreude," which is roughly

translated, "the enjoyable sin of enjoying someone else's misfortune. It is the kind of negative or false pleasure that people seek which sells those tabloid newspapers you see at the checkout counters in stores—the ones that have bold headlines calling your attention to bad things that have happened to celebrities so that you can gloat and say to yourself, "She only got what she deserved. It serves her right."

Another kind of negative pleasure is sought by some people who believe God is more pleased with them than others because they have followed all the rules or have the right beliefs and they are sure others do not. They get pleasure out of following the rules because in so doing they can consider themselves better and more loved by God. They get a kind of negative pleasure in

believing that God will punish those other awful sinners, while they will be rewarded.

However Jesus taught that experiencing and spreading God's pleasure comes through what he described in the Sermon on the Mount as "going the extra mile" simply because it's the right thing to do and you get joy out of doing it.

You might discover God's pleasure by singing an anthem in a choir with others, or digging mud out of a friend's flooded home, or being a Stephen Minister or a Sunday Church School teacher, or being a friend to someone who has no friends or in doing any good deed secretly. You are also experiencing God's pleasure when you can rejoice in the good fortune of others.

There will also be times in your life when you have difficulty in knowing true pleasure. Maintaining a strong belief in the creation's goodness does not always come easily. A young man from the community called me at home and said he was having a difficult time with his belief in creation's goodness. He said he wanted very much to believe and some of the time he did, but when he thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in his own life, he concluded that believing in God and the creation's goodness didn't make sense. I told him I was familiar with the experience. I am also puzzled by why there is so much evil and suffering in the world. I also said that I am equally puzzled by why there is so much goodness and genuine pleasure in life and I'm continually amazed by how much goodness there is in people.

I am convinced that all of you like the young man on the phone want to experience the pleasure of creation's goodness. You want the assurance that God is pleased with you . I remember a young woman saying to me one day, "I want to know that I am loved even when everything around me seems to indicate that I am not. Then she said, "I know it is 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 like the phrase in the story of the baptism of Jesus that describes God's Spirit descending on Jesus "like a dove." It's a beautiful metaphor. The phrase tells you that in order to discover God's pleasure in your life and in the world at large, it's mostly a matter of being open to the Spirit and allowing that power to work in

your life. There are people who search all over the world in exotic places and unusual religious movements in an attempt to discover the goodness in creation. But they frequently miss that spirit at home in their everyday lives and ordinary commonplace events. The Spirit of God is descending on them 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 said, "Wherever two are three are gathered in my name, there am I also."

A few weeks ago you celebrated Christmas. That beautiful story reminds you each year that you discover God in the commonplace. The shepherds and the wise men found God's goodness, God's pleasure, in a baby. When Jesus was an adult, he rediscovered the Spirit of

God in his life and it is described not in a momentous or earthshaking event, but "like a dove descending on him." It reminds me of Elijah who is in the darkest time of his life was hiding in a cave and was certain that God had forgotten him. He discovered God was not in the earthquake, or in the fire but in a "still small voice," or as some translators say "in the still silent assurance that God was there with him."

What the Bible is describing in all of these stories is the gift of knowing that God is pleased with you and with all of creation. It is the assurance that life can be all right even when everything seems all wrong. I am not talking here about some kind of magic which automatically makes everything all right in an instant. To know that God is pleased is to know that life is a blessing—that it is

truly good and wonderful even for you to be breathing and know that you are loved.

Knowing that God is pleased does not cure all your cancers, transform all your children or grandchildren into winners, or send you soaring into success. To know that God is pleased is to know that you can look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet know in your deepest self that life is good. It is to know that it is good for you to be alive and participating in the ongoing creation.

Here then are my suggestions for the new year. Do not be afraid to experience the fact that God is pleased with you. Do not be afraid to enjoy the 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 that to your friends and to your co-workers. Remember, life is good, be happy now, let it go. Amen.