A HABIT OF REJOICING

A Sermon Preached in Duke Chapel By
The Reverend Ms. Nancy A. Ferree
Assistant Minister to the University
Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14
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Today in addition to being the eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, is the first Recess Sunday since the beginning of this academic year here at Duke - not a particularly noteworthy fact in the church calendar perhaps; yet it seems timely in light of the theme of today's epistle reading. While St. Paul instructs us about rejoicing, many of our friends and colleagues are getting some first hand experience in doing exactly that - some of them on sandy beaches at Hilton Head, others on lofty mountain tops along the Blue Ridge Mountains! While some of us may have our own mixed feelings about being here rather than there on a Recess Sunday, we can nevertheless be of good cheer! The apostle Paul has brought a good word to us this morning which is applicable to every season: in every place rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say - rejoice!

This text, I believe is a challenging one for our time. Rejoicing, in twentieth century terms, just doesn't appear to be exactly the same thing as rejoicing in first century terms. How could Paul have ever expected sophisticated, modern day saints like us beset by problems on every side to take him seriously? We've got papers to write, bills to pay, and jobs to keep. Can we afford to interrupt our serious lives for something as seemingly irrelevant as rejoicing? Besides, anybody that sings God's praises too enthusiastically this day and age is automatically suspect, running the risk of being labeled a fanatic at the very least, or perhaps even in need of an appropriate sedative. Could St. Paul really have meant us, too, when he instructed the Philippians to rejoice?

Let us consider for a moment the context in which Paul was writing, in order to gain a deeper appreciation of exactly what he was saying, and who he was saying it to. These words, you see, were written in prison. Though the exact origin of the letter to the Philippians is not known, we do know that Paul was in real danger at the time of its writing of losing his life. Yet the entire letter breathes a radiant joy and serene happiness in Christ, as he instructs the faithful to stand firm in the Lord rejoicing

in God eternally. And this is not the only time we see such behavior coming from Paul. Acts 16 tells of the night he and Silas were thrown into prison for calling the evil spirits out of a slave girl. As they prayed and sang hymns to God, a great earthquake shook the foundations of the prison so that the walls tumbled around them. And it became the occasion of the jailer's conversion and that of his entire family. Clearly, Paul understood from experience the integral relation between rejoicing and thanksgiving under any circumstances. He wrote the Colossians to abound in thanksgiving, the Philippians to pray with thanksgiving, the Corinthians to witness with thanksgiving - instructing all of them to rejoice in the Lord at all times.

It certainly worked well for Paul. But how easily does rejoicing come for us? For our modern day intellects, not very easily, I am afraid. Having grown so accustomed to useful work and rational calculation as the guiding principles of our culture, we seem to be suffering from a shortage of meaningful celebrations compared to other cultures throughout history. Never has workaholism been so rampant in a society. Some view acts of celebration as a waste of time, impractical, inefficient. Yet who can deny the place of unprogrammed time, of quality play time, in all of our most important relationships? Isn't time needed just for enjoying the companionship of another person while we learn to rejoice in the unique worth of another? Isn't that an indispensable part of the way a relationship between two human beings grows?

Likewise, between human and divine. The Westminster Catechism says the chief end of a man or woman is to <u>love God and to enjoy him forever</u>. As in any other relationship of worth to us, we must engage in the discipline of learning to enjoy God by rejoicing in the everyday aspects of our relationship to Him. And that calls for celebrating.

How do we learn to do that? There are of course as many different ways as there are personalities in this sanctuary today. But let me suggest that if you're really interested in answering that question, you made a very wise first step by coming to worship this morning, not just because I'm preaching, but because it is in worship that we respond to God's graciousness towards us by seeking to enjoy God's presence, or in other words by rejoicing!

The Hebrew word for joy had many connotations in the Old Testament, the most general being associated with tumultuous group expression, suggesting the sounds of singing, shouting, noise, the playing of musical instruments, the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet. What is worship if not a tumultuous group expression of

praise to God, at least part of the time.

Many people readily admit they are drawn to worship at Duke Chapel specifically by the music. And is that such a bad thing? The organ becomes more than a concert instrument, the choir more than a group of performers when they call us forth to praise God in song. After all, it is in the act of singing that we experience a uniquely unison expression of our faith. As we raise our voices to reveal the breath of God which flows through the body and spirit of each of us, we experience an at-one-ness as the body of Christ which sustains and nurtures us, not to mention uplifts us, all to the glory of God!

John Wesley wrote, "Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength"!! Is it not the case that joy begets joy? Then let us sing all the more lustily that our joy may inspire another and another and another to greater heights of rejoicing!

Soon after my graduation from seminary I worked as a hospital chaplain on the oncology unit at NC Baptist Hospital. There I learned something of the kind of rejoicing that singing can represent under the most trying circumstances, and the strength it can provide. A woman I will call Jean had learned at age 50 of a malignancy. She underwent treatment off and on for about a year before receiving the news that there was nothing more that the doctors could do for her. She had to accept the fact that she would never leave the hospital again. The family, consisting of a husband and 3 daughters, did all that they possibly could to comfort her, not only by staying close by her side during her waking hours but by bringing pictures, handmade pillows decorated with needlepoint by friends, and family momentoes to her hospital room in an attempt to create something of an inviting atmosphere. Nevertheless, a terrible depression engulfed Jean which it seemed she would never be able to shake.

One day, in one of her slightly talkative moods, I dragged out of her the fact that she had enjoyed singing as a young girl in church. I asked her what kinds of things she remembered singing, and the memories began to pour out. . .<u>Jesus Loves Me</u>, <u>Amazing Grace</u>, <u>His Eye is on the Sparrow</u>. I then asked her if she would join with me as we sang what we could remember of those songs together. She was extremely hesitant at first, almost as if we would be approaching ground that was too sacred for her to tread; but she did ask me if I would sing for her. I was about halfway through the first verse of <u>Amazing Grace</u> when she began to join in, haltingly at first but obviously with deep feeling as tears streamed down her cheeks. That was the turning point for Jean. From that day forward she shed nothing but joy and light on those around her, even when her body was racked with pain. Mysterious, yes, but authentic. It was as if the light of God's grace had infused her entire being for the first time, even after fifty years of regular church attendance,

she had finally let go of the bitterness and resentment which had nearly destroyed her. Jean wanted to sing every day and she wanted others to sing with her. Indeed, it was a privilege to do so. When she finally slipped into a coma, we all were painfully aware that she had taken with her a rare, life-giving force - a habit of rejoicing which affirmed life even in the face of death.

In retrospect, I believe Jean was offering us a 20th-century version of Paul's own example of rejoicing in the Lord always. "Have no anxiety about anything", he wrote, translated in the King James version as "Be careful for nothing." Not even your life. As Jean was forced to come to grips within a few short weeks and as Paul had to confront nearly every day of his ministry, it is the joy of the Lord which is our strength (Neh. 8:10), and not our ability to hold on to those things which we once thought provided the basis of our security.

From the beginning of Christ's ministry, the theme of joy has been consistently prominent in Christianity - though equally consistently, it has alwyas had its resistors. As Christ came into the world, he was heralded by the angels, "I bring you good news of a great joy," while Herod was intent on destroying him. Christ left the world bequeathing that same joy to his disciples, "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full," while conspirators plotted to crucify him. Examples from Christ's teachings reveal that same resistance to joy by those who have failed to embrace the gospel. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father calls out the fatted calf in order that all may rejoice over the return of the lost son, while the older brother seethes in anger over the apparent injustice of the situation, unable to rejoice over the generosity of the father which he had, in fact, had access to all along.

In today's gospel lesson, we encounter those who resisted the joy even of a great marriage feast. Though the dinner was ready and the table prepared, those who had been invited made light of it and went on their way - one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest of them seized the king's servants and murdered them. The king, in return, declared those initially invited unworthy and ordered the servants to bring other guests in off the streets.

We smile at the image this parable depicts, with the table straining under the weight of the royal banquet, while unappreciative guests rudely disperse in every direction. Have you ever given a party to which no one came? Just imagine it. To ignore an invitation

to a feast is not only an insult to the host but a statement of our own priorities, not to mention poor judgment - especially when we choose to go about our business as if we had never received an invitation in the first place. Why would anyone refuse an invitation to Buckingham Palace, we might think? Yet invitations of the sort Jesus was referring to continue to be discarded time and again, sometimes even by those who thought they had already answered it.

The real issue underlying Paul's mandate to rejoice in the Lord is ultimately one of obedience. Our reason for celebration comes from a willingness to say an enthusiastic "Yes" to God's invitation to the marriage feast, to embrace His unconditional acceptance of us without hesitation, along with the incumbent responsibilities of discipleship. Part of the reason joy in the Christian life has fallen into such a shallow state of affairs is that too many have tried to find a shortcut for getting there. Though enthusiastic singing or other means of praising God are vitally important vehicles by which we express our joy, we are fully infused with the joy of the Lord only when He redeems and sanctifies the ordinary junctures of human life. And that requires that we invite God into our world in the everyday aspects, giving up our anxieties and letting our needs be made known to God with thanksgiving as we commit ourselves to His service. When the power that is in Christ pervades our lives completely, reaching into our work and our play, our homes and our communities, it is inevitable that there will be joy where once there was mourning. Therein lies the meaning of the Incarnation - God With Us, bringing fullness of life into the midst of death and decay.

Dietrich Bonnhoeffer spent two years in Nazi concentration camps before he was hanged. During that time it appears he left very strong impressions on nearly everyone he met. Writing about his own experiences as a prisoner, Payne Best, an English officer, had this to say about Bonnhoeffer: "He was all humility and sweetness, he always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive. . . He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom his God was real and close to him." How did he do it, we ask? In Bonnhoeffer's own words, he wrote during his time in prison that we are to love God with our whole hearts in such a way that it becomes a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. (A cantus firmus, if you are unfamiliar with the term, is a preexisting melody which is made the basis of a musical composition by the addition of contrapuntal voices. Depending on the creativity of the composer, many different kinds of counterpoint can be written to embellish the same cantus firmus.) Bonnhoeffer clearly established the love of God as the cantus firmus of his own life in demonstrating the obedience

which he did, but to which the counterpoint of joy and thanksgiving still could be added in seemingly endless array. As he himself said in Letters and Papers from Prison, "When the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint from being developed to the utmost of its limits".

We need ask ourselves this morning: What is the cantus firmus of our lives? Is the ground bass of our faith clear enough to support the complex counterpoint of the modern world, while still enabling us to sing a song of joy and thanksgiving to God? Are we daring enough to embellish it to the utmost of its limits?

God has given us yet another day to rejoice in His presence. Let us not delay in celebrating the fullness of life, that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may be ours - always. Amen.