

SUMMER T I M E JULY 25 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
M. KENT MILLARD

Our Church wide theme for this summer is simply SUMMERTIME, the time when we are supposed to experience a change of pace, take some vacation time away from our regular work responsibilities, slow down and smell the roses. It should be a time for more relaxing with those we love and experiencing more joy and laughter in our lives.

Today is also national "tell an old joke day" and last night our Spiritual Life center sponsored a pot luck dinner with home grown foods at Luke's Lodge and everyone was supposed to tell one of their favorite old jokes. We went and when we got there Minnietta just turned and pointed to me and said: "I brought my favorite old joke with me." At least I am glad I am her *favorite* old joke.

When we were on vacation this past week I read this passage of scripture from Luke 10 and was surprised to notice how it was a passage which referred to both the disciples and Jesus being filled with joy. It is the story about Jesus sending out 72 of his followers to go about bringing peace to people and healing those who were sick and how they returned filled with joy.

Read Luke 10:1-5; 17; 21: After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

THE SEVENTY TWO CAME BACK IN GREAT JOY...AT THAT TIME JESUS WAS FILLED WITH JOY.

PRAYER

Last week Minnietta and I went on a cruise ship tour from Montreal, Canada up the St. Lawrence Seaway to the French speaking city of Quebec, then on to Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Bar Harbor, Maine and ended up in Boston where we went to seminary at Boston University years ago. We enjoyed it immensely and had a lot of time to just be with each other without any other agenda, to eat together every meal, to tour historical and beautiful places, and, the part Minnietta enjoyed most, to shop for gifts for our family!

No matter how much someone loves what they do, it is important for all of us to take some time apart to be with those we love most, to slow down, and exhale and just relax and get away from all of the

strains and stresses of life for a little while. That is what summertime is about and I hope that you and your loved ones have some time apart to rest, read and relax.

While we were on the cruise, Minnietta and I read a novel entitled *THE SPIRAL GARDEN* by ANN HINES who is a United Church pastor in Canada and author. She is a talented and humorous writer and tells a story about a United Church of Canada woman pastor and some of the challenges she faces in being a pastor.

The heart of the novel, however, is that Rev. RUTH BROGGAN wants God to speak to her personally. God speaks to people in the Bible all the time so Rev. Ruth locks herself in the church parsonage and tells the congregation that she will not come out until God speaks to her. This goes on for months and various people in the congregation conduct the services on Sunday and pray for their pastor while she is waiting for God to speak to her and members of the congregation all leave casseroles at her front door to provide her with nourishment while she waits for God.

New Age people of all types also come and camp out on the church and parsonage lawn eagerly waiting to see what God might say to someone so determined to hear the voice of God. National newspapers pick up the story and national church officials become concerned about her sanity and about all of these strange unchurched people who are now hanging around the church practicing meditations and ceremonies of all types.

Rev. Beth experiences the presence and beauty of God by just slowing down and observing the beauty of God's sunlight coming through the parsonage windows and she finds God in the beauty of soap bubbles as she scrubs the kitchen floor of the parsonage. After her months of hibernation in the parsonage, she comes out simply radiating with joy because God was all around her all the time but she had never slowed down enough to experience the living, loving presence of God in her life.

When she came back to the church, it was packed with people who wanted to hear the word of God and she simply wanted them all to trust God and to play games and to laugh and enjoy each other.

One of the ideas that came to me out of this novel is the idea of simply trusting God and laughing. It occurred to me that I don't think we can ever really laugh and experience joy in our lives unless we first trust God with our lives.

You see, when we are so uptight and anxious about life and so determined to fix life and make it come out the way we think it ought to come out, we are burdened with the weight of the world, anxious and fearful about life. When we are so burdened with the cares of the world, we can't relax and enjoy life; we only worry about it.

But when we trust that our lives, the lives of those we love, the life our nation and world are ultimately in the loving hands of God, when we can really let go and let God be God in our lives, then we can exhale and experience the living presence of God bringing joy into our lives.

You see, I think that is what happened in the story I just read from Luke's Gospel. Jesus chooses 72 of his followers and sends them out to the neighboring towns and villages of Galilee to heal the sick, tell them the good news that God is already here and present in their lives and to bring peace to their homes.

Now, first Jesus tells them that they will have to trust God to provide for them on this journey they are all making. That is why he says to them: "Don't worry about what you will eat or where you will stay and don't take any extra money with you. Just go to the sick and pray God's healing power over them and bring peace to everyone you meet and tell them that God is present right here right now and cares about you."

If you simply trust God and love and heal the people you meet, you will be cared for; all of your physical needs will be met.

The 72 come back to Jesus a month later filled full to overflowing with great joy and great stories about how God used them to bring healing and hope into the lives of people and how the people opened up their doors and gave them all the food they needed and lodging.

Those 72 followers trusted God, loved people and returned laughing and filled with joy over their experience.

I think the same thing is true today. When we surrender our lives and concerns into the hands of God and genuinely trust God and love the people around us, we too will be filled with joy and be able to laugh and enjoy the journey of life we are on.

On the screen, there is a picture of the laughing Jesus. We often think of Jesus as being overly serious about life, and we ignore the many times in the Gospels where we are told that Jesus was filled with joy.

I like to imagine that the laughing Jesus has just heard the stories about his followers amazing experiences on the road when they trusted God for all their needs, loved and healed people and the joy they felt as a result of what God had just done in their lives.

Maybe Peter has just told a story to Jesus about what happened when he went into the town of Cana and he prayed God's healing power over a lame man and the man was healed and jumped up and started dancing with everyone around him including the straight laced Pharisees who didn't know how to respond to a lame man dancing with them.

I don't know what the story was, but there was some story about trusting God and sharing love with people that brought laughter and joy to Jesus and his followers.

We need to do the same and share the stories about times when we have trusted God and loved people and experienced laughter and joy in our lives.

I once read that joy is the surest sign of the presence of God in someone's life and the lack of joy is the surest sign of the absence of God in someone's life. This morning I want us to think about how much we allow joy in our lives which comes when we trust God with our lives and love the people around us.

One of the big surprises to me was about how many unexpected and sometimes humorous things happen in the life of a pastor. I once shared these stories with a small group of St. Luke's people and they insisted I share them in a sermon sometime so here they are.

Several years ago I was scheduled to perform a wedding for a man who had been divorced a few years earlier. A few weeks before the wedding, I received a phone call from the man's ex-wife. She asked me

if I was going to perform the wedding for this man and his new bride. I said, "Yes, I am." She responded by saying, "I just want you to know that they will not be alive at the end of the wedding." And then she hung up.

I called the groom and told him what his ex wife had said to me and he responded by saying she had called and told him the same thing. He also told me that his children told him that his ex wife had bought a gun.

I asked: "Do we have a problem here?"

The man responded by telling me that he was not going to allow his ex-wife to spoil his wedding so he had hired some plain closed police officers to be at the wedding and intercept her and not allow her to attend the wedding. He also told me that she was going to wear a disguise to his wedding.

Now, I will have to confess, that I was getting a little anxious about performing this wedding.

I had a picture of his ex-wife and when each woman came for the wedding, I would look at her very carefully and ask myself, "Is she wearing a wig; is this the ex-wife?"

The church was packed for the wedding and I realized that I was the only one facing the congregation and who could keep a watchful eye on everyone. So I was doing the wedding and trying to be watchful for any problems that might arise.

In the middle of the wedding, someone dropped a hymnal on the floor with a loud bang and I immediately went down on the floor and hit the deck. The groom started laughing because he realized my fear and he lifted me up and said, "Everything is okay," and we continued on with the wedding.

The truth is that she didn't come to the wedding; she just wanted to put a little fear in the setting and it worked with me.

Perhaps I should have been more trusting of God and less anxious in that situation.

Can you think of any situations in your life when you should have been more trusting in God and not so anxious?

When we genuinely trust God with everything, like the disciples sent out to the towns in Galilee, when we let go and let God, then we will live a much more joyful life and find ourselves laughing at ourselves and our own anxieties about life.

I have another wedding story I look back on and now laugh about.

I was performing a wedding when I looked at the bride and she looked very pale. I whispered to her, "Are you okay?" She said, "Yes," and then promptly fainted.

The groom grabbed one of her arms and I grabbed the other to keep her from falling to the floor. She was completely unconscious and hanging like a rag doll between the two of us.

The groom cried out, "What are we going to do now?" I had a microphone on so everyone clearly heard his anxious plea.

I said: "Let's take her over to that bench where she can sit down until she recovers."

So he and I began to drag her over to the bench. He stepped on her wedding gown while I was dragging her and we heard a large ripping sound and realized that we have just torn out the back of her wedding dress.

While we are dragging her, her high heeled shoes also bounced off her feet.

We put her on the bench and I flipped some water in her face trying to help her regain consciousness. Eventually she came to and asked, "What happened?" I explained that she kind of fainted and we brought her to this bench to recover. She asked, "Why are my shoes over there?" I explained that they fell off when we were bringing her to this bench. I decided that she didn't really need to know about the big tear in the back of her wedding dress at that moment.

So we went back over to the center of the platform and her groom held her up on one side and the best man held up the other while I quickly completed the wedding ceremony.

Afterwards, we went downstairs for the reception and the bride came over and said that she was so embarrassed about fainting during the wedding ceremony. Then she asked me, "Do you think I might have fainted because I am pregnant?"

I gulped and said, "I don't know about things like that. Congratulations on your wedding and your new baby."

No one ever told me that being a pastor would be so much fun and have so many occasions for laughter.

One more humorous story:

This happened at a funeral. We were having the committal service at a National Guard cemetery for a man who had served in the military when he was young. The service was under a tent on the parking lot where everyone was seated on temporary folding chairs.

After I pronounced the benediction, the guardsmen fired their guns into the air in honor of their deceased colleague. However, when they did that, a woman in the front row was startled and she jumped in her folding chair, the chair collapsed and she fell to the ground.

A little boy saw what happened and shouted loud enough for all to hear: "THEY SHOT GRANDMA." And he ran over to comfort his grandma.

Grandma and everyone else started laughing heartily and explained to the little boy that they did not shoot grandma, she just fell off the chair and that she was fine.

All the family members came up and told me that the man who had passed away was a great practical joker and they thought he was probably behind the broken chair incident.

I realized that in many ways, the laughter was healing and helpful to the family in getting through their time of grief. Every time I saw that family, years later, they would remember that story and we would laugh again.

It has been said that laughter is the best medicine for healing many of our problems and woes and I think it is true. Laughter loosens up some endorphins in our bodies which actually make us feel better.

Some medical experts say that everyone should have a hearty laugh about something every day for their mental and physical health.

Years ago, the famous author Norman Cousins became critically ill with a very painful disease. He was given huge doses of pain killer but he was still in pain. He discovered that when some of his friends came to see him and they told him funny stories, he would laugh and his pain would decrease.

So Norman Cousins checked himself out of the hospital and into a nice hotel. At the hotel, he would show funny movies by the three stooges, the Keystone cops, or other comedians hour after hour. He said that if he spent an hour or more laughing at a movie, it would give him three or four pain free hours without taking any pain killer medicine.

After about a month of laughing all day, Norman Cousins was no longer in pain and was able to resume his life as a nationally known writer. He also became a lecturer at medical schools talking to doctors about his experience with the healing power of laughter.

I once read that people who read the comic section in the Sunday newspaper and get a chuckle out of the comics are often more mentally healthy than those who only read the news reports in the newspaper.

Jesus sent out 72 followers and told them to simply trust God to take care of their physical needs on their journey, to love the people they met and bring peace to their homes, and to heal the sick and then the 72 returned they were filled with joy over the experience and Jesus was filled with joy.

Perhaps the formula is this: Trust in God, love people, bring peace into their lives and pray for the sick then our lives will be filled with joy.

When I was pastor in another congregation I was overwhelmed with the challenges and burdens of leading that church. The church had financial problems, there was conflict among some of the key leaders of the church, and I was carrying all of these problems on my own shoulders.

The church where I was pastor was one of these huge old stone church buildings with a very large sanctuary and a balcony around three sides; it was a building about the physical size of Roberts Park United Methodist Church downtown.

One night I dreamed that I had that actual church building on my shoulders and it was exceedingly heavy and it was weighting me down. In my dream I was trying to lift this huge building off my shoulders and it was impossible and I was frustrated and worn down.

Then, in my dream, Jesus came and lifted the church off of my shoulders. It wasn't heavy for Jesus; he picked it up easily.

I felt such a feeling of relief; that I didn't have the weight of the church on my shoulders. Then in my dream, I said to Jesus, "But if I don't have to carry the church, as a pastor, what am I supposed to do?"

Then, Jesus said to me in my dream: "Let me carry the church, you just run around and play in it."

So in my dream, Jesus was carrying the church and I was just running up and down the aisles dancing and singing and playing in the church. I woke up that morning with a smile on my lips and deep sense of relief that I could trust Jesus to carry the church and I could run and play in it.

This morning I want you to think about anything you are carrying on your shoulders. It may be worries about your family, your business, the state of the economy, the government, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or other concerns in your life. I'd like for you to imagine that Jesus is here today to lift these concerns off your shoulders so that you can run around and laugh and play in life.

Right now, can you just imagine that Jesus is here and he lifts these worries and concerns off your shoulders and says, "I came that you might have life and laughter abundantly."

Trust God to take care of you and your needs, love and bless the people around you, lighten up, laugh more and you too will be filled with great joy.

Let us pray.