

**September 21, 2014**

**TEXT: Luke 10:1-9, 17-20**

**TITLE: Foundations of Faith: On True Joy**

When I prepare to write a sermon, I get out a piece of paper and do some “free association.” I think about the topic I want to discuss and then write down ideas or images that come to mind. We have been looking at foundations of faith, and having considered war and peace, wealth and poverty, today’s topic is joy. As I thought about joy, the first thing I wrote on my piece of paper was funny cat videos. Luckily I soon thought of other things – synonyms for joy like happiness, pleasure, gratitude, laughter. I thought of well-being, peace, and kindness. Then I thought of how Jesus sent 70 of his followers into the neighboring villages and how the bible says they all “returned with joy.” Something happened back then to fill the people with joy, but what was it?

I pictured the crowd hearing Jesus tell them that laborers were needed for God’s harvest - how they were to go off not carrying a purse or bag or extra supplies, but simply to rely on the hospitality of others. I wondered what this must have been like and then the next thing I wrote down was the words “monks” and “monastery.” Now, Presbyterians don’t usually talk much about monks – and I bet that for many of you, this is how you think of them. (audio clip) There’s actually a lot we can learn from the venerable Christian tradition of monasticism.

From the earliest days of the church, many people tried to live the Christian faith in all its fullness, rejecting the priorities of the world to dedicate themselves to prayer, fasting, and bible study. They tried to live in their present age as citizens of the age to come. Initially, for some that meant they withdrew from the world – living solitary lives as hermits staying in caves out in the desert. However, if you wanted to learn from a wise hermit, you needed to live by him; so over time loose communities began to form around these reclusive saints. By around 320 AD, religious communities moved in from the desert and began to form around the edges of town. People lived together under the authority of an abbot, structuring their daily life around work, study, and prayer. The Christian life was no longer a hermit’s existence of asceticism. It now involved working hard for the common good while living together as a community of faithful followers of Christ.

Now, no one is suggesting this type of life was easy. Garrison Keillor tells of a man who entered a monastery and took a vow of extreme silence. Only once a year could he write a single word on a chalkboard in front of the head monk. After a hard first year, Word Day came around and he wrote “the” on the chalkboard. Another long year of silence elapsed, and for that Word Day the monk wrote “food” on the chalkboard. Finally he struggled through a third year and on Word Day wrote on the chalkboard “stinks.” To which the head monk says, “What’s with you? You’ve been here for three years and all you’ve done is complain.” Kathleen Norris visited a monastery and when she asked a monk about what was difficult about the communal life, he didn’t mention celibacy or praying seven

times a day. He smiled and said “our biggest problem is that each man here had a mother who fried potatoes in a different way.”<sup>1</sup>

When I wrote down “monks” on my sermon sheet about “joy,” I think I was drawn to the simplicity we associate with monastic life. Monks typically are free of lots of possessions, like Jesus’ admonition to go into the harvest without an extra purse, bag or supplies. I am pretty sure that if you seek advice on how to find “joy” in your life, you won’t be told to go out and buy a lot of stuff. Commercials, catalogs, and TV shopping channels may suggest that the way to happiness comes through buying things. But if one road is the road of acquisitions and accumulation, I’m pretty sure the road to joy runs in the opposite direction.

Another thing I wrote on my sermon sheet was a prayer that I’ve heard over and over again at African American churches. It is when someone stands up and says, “I just want to thank the Lord for waking me up this morning.” It’s rare for me to hear that prayer in a Presbyterian service. Sadly that may be due to a sense of rationalism and privilege that too often marks our theology – the idea that *“Of course I’ll wake up in the morning. I’m a biological creature designed to grow weary at night and then wake up in the morning. I’m Presbyterian – part of the frozen chosen. I believe that once I’m awake and I start to do things, it is through those actions that I’m either good or bad, moral or immoral in the eyes of God.”* Maybe we Presbyterians need a dose of Baptist humility. Maybe once we open our eyes, we need to tell ourselves “Thank you God, I’m alive for another day!” Because, in truth, there was no guarantee that you’d wake up this day. And even when you did awake, you found yourself in a world you didn’t create, enjoying a salvation you didn’t earn. (Can I get a witness?)

Presbyterians should begin our days thanking God for waking us up in the morning. Our theology stresses that God’s grace is primary in our life. It lovingly surrounds us on all sides, existing behind us, right beside us, and out in front of us wherever we may be heading. Recognizing the all-encompassing and unmerited nature of God’s loving grace is the foundation of what some call an “attitude of gratitude.” And that this attitude is intimately connected to joy is something that every religious tradition professes to be true. Tecumseh, the Native American leader of the Shawnee tribe back in the early 1800s, once said, *“When you rise in the morning, give thanks for the light, for your life, for your strength. Give thanks for your food, and for the joy of living. If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself.”* Joy therefore is linked to a simplicity in life and a thankfulness toward life. I believe that to be true. However, that definition sounds more like pop psychology than faith foundations. Is there more on this subject we can glean from Jesus’ instructions to the seventy?

Jesus’ earthly ministry was drawing to a close. He needed to prepare others for the work of spreading the gospel into all the world. Just as Moses long before named 70 elders to assist him in caring for the Jewish people, Jesus named 70 disciples to carry his message into all the towns and villages. They went in pairs

since two voices better proved the truth of the message being shared. Their work began with prayer, asking that the Lord of the harvest be with them every step of the way. Then Jesus said this simple phrase: “Go on your way.” In effect, they were to go as they felt led; they were to follow their own life-path and rely on their particular gifts and abilities. They weren’t to try to be someone else. God made them as they are – just as God made you as you are (physically, emotionally, in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation) and calls you to “Go on your way” as workers in God’s fields of life.

Jesus then told them not to carry a purse, bag, or sandals and not to greet anyone on the road. They were to stay focused and not get distracted either by accumulating wealth and possessions or by passing fads and worldly crazes. This work is about the Kingdom, not the Kardashians. They were to offer peace – and then receive hospitality. That last point is important. If your hands are full with stuff, how can someone offer you a gift? If you’re too busy doing stuff, when can someone do something for you? You may want to be in control all the time, but that isn’t God’s plan for your life. If you can connect with others humbly and be open to having them be a part of your life, only then can you receive love and hospitality from them. St. Francis wisely said that it is in giving that we also receive. But the inverse is just as true: It is in being able to receive that we learn how to give. Ask yourself: How easily do you let others care for you? How ready are you today to be vulnerable enough, childlike enough, to fully depend on the hospitality, grace and love the world wishes to share with you?

In the other section I read from Luke 10, the returning mission workers told Jesus how demons obeyed their commands, and that all manner of evil, snakes, scorpions and powers of the Evil One, submitted to the gospel message. Don’t get sidetracked by the literal meaning of these verses and end up waving a bible while tossing around rattlesnakes in some church in the Kentucky foothills. Jesus is simply making a point. The message of the gospel – of justice, redemption, hope – is one that runs contrary to all demonic, life-destroying narratives being told in this world. Demonic narratives about power and wealth, about allowing abuse or rape or racism to exist in our relations with others, about ‘might makes right’ and ‘get yours while the getting is good’. Christianity not only challenges but undermines all these violent, false messages. In recognizing this fact, this liberating good news, the women and men returned to Jesus filled with joy.

It’s hard to precisely describe “joy” – it is less a “thing” and more a “quality” of many things that make up a life of faith. It is the simplicity and piety of the monks long ago and Presbyterians today. It is the gratitude of the prayer spoken each morning for the gift of life, and the gratitude that comes when you receive true hospitality from someone else. If you tried to take a picture of “joy,” it would never be a “selfie” but always be a photo with someone else beside you. But if you really want to understand “joy,” then remember Jesus’ instructions to those 70 disciples and take them to heart.

Now you may want to write this next part down. According to Jesus, joy consists of six things all found in Luke 10. The secret of joy is this: 1) Prayer (Ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into the field.) 2) Then go on your own, God-guided way. 3) Travel light – really light. 4) Offer peace to all. 5) In gratitude and humility, receive hospitality from others. 6) Be steadfast in healing brokenness and subverting all that is evil. If you do these six things, wherever you travel – or whenever you find your way home back to your bed at night – assuredly you too will return with joy. Thanks be to God!

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, The Cloister Walk, 1996, p. 21.