"IN PRAISE OF JOY"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke
"IN PRAISE OF JOY"

INTRODUCTION
When I was a child, I used to go to a Sunday School held in a one room church in a little village on the Mohawk River just across from the city of Schenectady. And every Sunday morning, without fail, we followed the same procedure.

We always sang a few songs while waiting for the people to arrive. I can picture the Sunday School Superintendent standing up front and asking, "Are there any requests?" And before we children could even get the hymn books open, one of the adults would call out a number...the pianist would swing into it...and off we'd go. We always seemed to sing the songs the adults wanted to sing; we were seldom given a chance to call out one of our favorites, but I assumed that this was one of those things that went along with being an adult - you got to choose the songs, the hymns...in church.

I was really too young to read the words and so I used to turn around in my place - the little chairs were always set up in front of the big chairs - and I'd have fun watching the adults sing. But there was something that often puzzled me. Whenever they proclaimed they had "joy, joy, joy...down in their hearts", they would sing with such bored and sour expressions on their faces that it just didn't add up. It mystified me. The quality of joy that they were singing about seemed to be missing from their lives.

DEVELOPMENT
As I say, it bothered me then, and it bothers me now. Why were these people - good, solid church-goers - so short of joy? Who knows, maybe you've thought about this, too - for I don't think it's a situation which existed only in the past in that little village of Rexford, outside of Schenectady. There may be someone who acts that same way with you in the pew right now, or in your home, or at work, or more important - in your mirror.

You've heard me tell the story of the young lady who was cleaning up her apartment here in the city one Sunday morning. And quite accidentally she vacuumed up her pet-canary. The canary somehow survived the ordeal, but she reported, "He doesn't sing much any more...mostly just sits and stares." Many people in our churches today are like this...sitting and staring...so little in the way of joy and enthusiasm which Christians should have..."deep down in their hearts".

Last month on my trip to England I visited the little Methodist Church in Masham up in Yorkshire from whence my parents came. They met there and were married there and two weeks later set sail for America. It was a high moment for me to look around that Church or chapel which bears the name Park Street Methodist Church. But one of my memories of that visit has to do with a turn of the century photograph of a woman named Jessie Weatherspoon, a stalwart of that fellowship. Underneath the photograph was her name with this line, "She never sat down to a meal without her Bible next to her plate". And I'll swear I've never seen a more dour, sour expression on the face of a person. It was something. She looked like she had indigestion.

Of course there have been periods in the past when people have been reluctant to show any joy in their lives because they felt it was somehow more spiritual to be serious. Life is not a game, they will say. It's a pretty serious business.
Religion is not for the frivolous. We live at all times under the watchful eye of the Almighty, the righteous Judge. He sees all things and knows all things. So, you'd better be good. Remember that line that was in one of the prayers of confession of the Presbyterian Church, "Have mercy upon us miserable worms". I suppose if you've been brought up on such theology...on the diet of being reminded that you're a miserable worm, that it's hard to conjure up much room for "joy...down in the heart".

LOOK AT JESUS

It's hard for me to understand how any Christian could look at Jesus - who He was and what He did - and not begin to ask some questions about joy. For when you read the account of His life, you can't escape the atmosphere of joy that surrounded Him. And I think we've lost it.

Remember that when the Pharisees criticized Him, they did so because He was living joyfully - not according to the severity of their rules and regulations. He and His disciples did not fast, He told them, because His being with them was like a marriage feast - exempt from such requirements. And so many of His wonderful stories were about people who were surprised by joy when they least expected it - the joy of the woman who found a lost coin, the joy of the shepherd who brought home the lost sheep, the joy of the father who welcomed home the Prodigal Son, saying:

"It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for this, my son was lost and is found. He was dead and is alive again..."

Remember to whom Jesus was speaking. Poor people. People who were living in an occupied country, people burdened with heavy taxes, weary with backbreaking demands for ritual piety.

He came preaching joy to people whose lives were largely without joy. His message to them was wrapped up in a sermon which was to be one of His most famous utterances - the Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which was read earlier in the service - the Beatitudes. Here's His prescription for happiness and for joy. And one of His last statements made to His disciples was, "These things have I spoken that My joy might remain with you and your joy might be full!"

There it is, dear friends, and I believe He would say the same things to us today if He were here. Without minimizing the seriousness of Christian discipline, nor short-changing the mood of contrition and genuine repentance, I would affirm that one of the real marks of the Christian life is genuine joy and celebration.

You ask, well if that's the case...if one of the marks of the Christian life is joy, then why is there so much gloom and pessimism around? A good question. And why is it lacking in our lives, or in the life of the Church. It may be that we haven't really let the message invade our hearts. The world out there can be so strong. As I was turning this over in my mind I remembered a quotation that I had tucked away in my file, given to me by a friend. It's a beautiful paragraph and as I read it to you, listen carefully and relate it to where you're at:

"Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, the lack of wealth or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment in marriage or having a boresome job - grievously hard as they may be to bear."
"It lies in the fading of your youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the death of the sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep joy in the world and living, that pure faith and believing heart, the bubbling of the divine joy within us."

**SPIRIT OF WONDER**

Why so many gloomy Christians? It may be because we have lost some important things.

For one thing, we may have lost that "sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children". And this is a great loss - indeed! No matter how grim things are, part of life is a game for children. The bathroom rug becomes a boat, a chair is a fort, and off they go into a world of pretend at a moment's notice.

Children are so free from sham and cover-up. They cheerfully report to teachers and friends and grandparents those conversations which take place in their homes which their parents would never dream of having aired in public. I remember one such conversation that my 21 year old daughter, Caroline had with her grandmother when she was eight years old.

She walked into the kitchen and said to her grandmother, "Nanna...today's going to be a bad day...it's going to be sooo bad." "Why, Caroline?" said her grandmother. "Why...it's lovely outside. Is something wrong?" "Oh, Nanna," she replied, "The mail just came and I see your Con Ed bill and grandpa is going to open it and be terribly upset." I was told of this several days later and I realized how much gloom I probably projected on those dark days when the Con Ed bill would arrive.

We adults can learn so much from children. We take ourselves so seriously at times. We're consumed by responsibilities in life and forget that it is here for us to enjoy. How long has it been since you burst into spontaneous laughter, or suddenly began humming or whistling to yourself, or laughed at one of your own mistakes. Try it. It may be longer than you think. I came across a clipping recently that said, "Laughter Is the Best Exercise".

Henry Ward Beecher, that great preacher of another era, had his share of enemies for he was a man of outspoken sentiments. He was criticized widely and if he had taken it to heart, it would have been difficult for him. On one occasion he received a letter which contained the word "FOOL". The next Sunday he told his congregation cheerfully that he had known of people who wrote letters and forgot to sign their names, but this was the first time he had received a letter from someone who signed his name, but forgot to write the letter.

Yes, we take ourselves far too seriously most of the time. Every now and then we need to shake ourselves up a bit and ask why we have allowed ourselves to become so stifled in our imaginations that we miss the wonder and joy of life along the way.

**WONDER STORY**

One of my favorite "wonder stories" is told by a friend who went with his family on a trip to Niagara Falls. They took the famous boat trip on the Maid of the Mist which goes up the gorge until it is literally into the spray of the falls. The passengers had been laughing and
talking and shivering in the gray day, but just as they reached the spray the sun came out in full force and the spray was lit up with ten thousand rainbows.

The people who had been talking and laughing fell silent in the magic of this transcendent moment of beauty. And as the hush fell over the boat, a voice was heard to say, "Boy...they sure didn't put much mustard on this hot dog". And the friend remarked,

"Isn't that just like us...to be in the presence of one of life's wonder moments and miss it completely because we are concerned about the mustard on our hot dogs".

WHAT ABOUT YOURSELF

What about yourself? Are you "one of the mustard on the hot dog" persons? Perhaps you are and perhaps you need to be reminded that to see wonders, one must be ready for them. They can come at unexpected times and in the most unusual places. We must get ourselves open and be ready to receive the joys that surround us. We need to look with the seeing eye, listen with the hearing ear.

Have we lost that "sparkling sense of wonder" that we had as children? I don't think it's lost...merely latent. For some, youthful visions have faded and that "sparkling sense of wonder" that Jesus brought is buried deep...covered up. But it can be brought back and renewed through worship, as we "wait upon the Lord"

A friend sent along some words from a young widow who was left with two small children after an automobile accident that took her husband's life. She headed the words, "Wonder" and this is how they read:

"I am always astonished
when the phone rings and I hear the voice of my friend.
I am always astonished
when I look at my children's faces, or watch them at a distance - running, playing, yelling, laughing.
I am always astonished
at the smell of the earth after a rain, when all is fresh and new and everything seems possible.
I am always astonished
that my tears and loneliness, my emptiness and longing do not overwhelm me, and life is unexpectedly glorious."

LET US PRAY

Teach us, O Lord, not to hold on to life too tightly. Teach us to hold it lightly - not carelessly, but lightly, easily. Teach us to take it as a gift - to enjoy it and to cherish it, and to let it go gracefully and thankfully when the time comes.

The gift is great, but the Giver is greater still. Thou, O God, art the Giver and in Thee is the life that never dies. In the spirit of Jesus who brought us joy we now pray. Amen.
SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

We are celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism this morning....

David Edward Seduski is being presented for Christian Baptism....infant son of Karen and Henry Seduski....brother of Daniel, David was born on Friday, March 25th, 1988...several days later showed up at the Altar Rail - here - with his mother for Maundy Thursday Holy Communion....

He's with us again today.

Surrounded by grandparents...and God parents, Marion and David Stuteville. Pleased to have you all here....to share in this wonderful moment.

Brother Daniel Walter Seduski, baptized here on April 27th, 1986...2 years and 3 months ago.
TOMORROW EVENING

Members of the Adult Fellowship are invited to share in the South Street Seaport Jazz Cruise tomorrow evening. Plan to meet at 6 pm in front of the Ann Taylor store at the Seaport and head for a foot-tapping cruise around Manhattan. For further details, contact Sandra Van Cleve at 752-5334. There's a $20.00 charge.

AT THE LECTERN

The Reverend Sara E. Goold will be at the lectern from now through Labor Day (except for August 28th) while Mr. Clarke is on vacation. Pastor Goold will also be available to cover any pastoral concerns. She can be reached at 873-7042.

NEXT SUNDAY

The Reverend Richard J. Rice, Associate Executive Director of the United Methodist City Society and our former District Superintendent, will be in the pulpit next Sunday. His sermon title is, "Wonder Bread".

ALDERSGATE CLASS

The Aldersgate Class meets on Wednesday evening at 7:30 pm in Fellowship Hall.

THE AUGUST ISSUE

New items for the August issue of our monthly news sheet are most welcome. It will be "out" on Sunday, August 14th.
Assisting with the worship services for much of the summer will be Rev. Sara E. Goold. Sara Goold is known to many of us from previous visits to our pulpit and to the "Hounds of Heaven". She also led the discussion group at our church on the Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the nuclear crisis back in 1987. She serves as Associate for Program Development for the Metropolitan District, New York Conference, and has a special interest in Christian healing. Rev. Goold will serve at the lectern starting on Sunday, July 17, through the month of August, and will also preach on August 7 and 21. In addition she is available for pastoral duties while Mr. Clarke is on vacation July 30 to August 10, and again from August 17 to September 7.

Serving in the pulpit on July 31 will be Rev. Richard J. Rice, Associate Executive Director of the United Methodist City Society and former District Superintendent of the Metropolitan District. On August 14, we will hear from our good friend and fellow member, Rev. Leland Gartrell. Further details will follow in the August issue of this newsletter.

The choir, however, will be resting its collective vocal chords until after Labor Day. But fear not -- Lyndon will not sing, too. Instead, he will be ably assisted by some fine soloists, starting on July 3 with one he knows well -- Jane Woodside. On the Sundays following, the tentative schedule of soloists includes: July 10 -- the Demasio Family; July 17 -- the Brown Family; July 24 -- Bob Smith; July 31 -- Stephanie Weems; and August 7 -- Barbara Hairston. Our thanks to all our soloists for keeping us "in tune" this summer!

Once again that groovy group on the Adult Fellowship Committee is planning some terrific times for those of us who are stuck in the city during the dog days of summer. Leading off the festivities will be a Central Park Concert on Monday evening, July 11. The featured performer of the evening will be Metropolitan Opera tenor, Placido Domingo -- only on this occasion the charming Mr. Domingo has planned an evening of love songs under the stars (sigh!). PAMC fans will meet at 6:30 pm on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and head for a spot on the Great Lawn. Bring your blanket and picnic supper, and plan to enjoy a lovely evening of musical al fresco.

Two weeks later, on Monday evening, July 25, there's a different kind of musical evening planned -- a South Street Seaport Jazz Cruise. The PAMC group will gather at 6:00 pm in front of the Ann Taylor store at the Seaport and head for a foot-tapping cruise around Manhattan. Reservations are needed, so contact Carl Condra (724-3733) or Sandy Van Cleve (752-5334). There's a charge of $20.00.

For more than 100 PAMC members and friends, Saturday, June 25, was a banner day. The annual All-Church Picnic went off without a hitch, thanks to superb planning and execution by Doreen Morales. There was something for everyone, from couch potatoes to jocks, and plenty of fabulous eats. Highlights of the PAMC ALL-STAR GAME included the performance by winning pitcher, Gary Klein, a tie for the Golden Glove Award by the father and son duo of Bill and John Bell, and a 1.000 batting average for our own Phil (Mattingly) Clarke! Best Team Spirit Award goes to the Browne Family, who got into everything en masse and with gusto. And finally, a special vote of appreciation to the Weatherman, for giving us one of the great picnic days of all time!
Happy July

Risley Fund Update

The new "John J. Risley Fund for the Needy," first reported on in the May issue of this newsletter, is already proving to be an effective way for our church to reach out to those in need. Mr. Clarke reports that to date he has dispersed approximately $25.00 in McDonald's meal tickets and $15.00 in subway tokens to people who have come to our church needing food or transportation to a shelter. The Risley Fund is made up of $100.00 donations from each rummage sale, as well as individual gifts from anyone who would like to help.

Rose on the Altar

The rose on the altar on Sunday, June 26, was in honor of Nicholas Lincoln Peck, infant son of Glen and Susan Peck, born June 12.

Condolescences

Our condolences to Cheryl Kollegger on the death of her father, the Reverend J. Russell Bales, on June 11. A memorial service is planned for July 4 in Vermont.

In Hospital

Our prayers and good wishes are with Curnell Parham, who is in St Luke's Hospital, Room 4415; and with Phyllis Westermann, who entered Columbia Presbyterian Hospital June 30. Room 712 and phone # 305-4868.

Jack of All Trades

At a recent meeting of the Administrative Council, it was voted to extend the hours of our church Business Manager, Jack Schmidt. Jack will now be in the church office Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays from 1:00 - 7:00 pm, and Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3:00 - 7:00 pm. His longer hours will enable him to expand the range of his duties to include managing the church office, thus relieving our pastor of a number of administrative tasks.

Ycp July Needs

The Yorkville Common Pantry has requested donations of peanut butter and tea bags for July. The baskets will be out on the fourth Sunday of the month, July 24.

Fair Pick-Up July 23

The organizers of this year's All-Church Christmas Fair are planning another "pick-up Saturday" on July 23. If you have items you'd like to donate to the Fair (no clothing, please -- save that for the rummage sale), contact Mary Lou McGanney (877-2901) to arrange to have your donations picked up and brought to the church. Remember to ask for a form letter for tax purposes.

New Address

Bud Brown can now be reached at: P.O. Box 1685, Taraboro, NC 27886, (919) 446-5757.

Friends from Former Days

While visiting in England last month, Mr. Clarke was entertained by former members, Ruth and Freddie Daniel and their four children, Miriam, Gordon, Naomi and Luke in their home outside of Coventry. Freddie was the origanal editor and moving spirit behind A Word in Edgeways (1971-72). They send their love to all PAMC friends who might remember them. At the same time, Mr. Clarke was able to "touch base" with Chris and Susan James over roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. In London there was more roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at Simpson's on the Strand with Sykes and Jane Wilford and their sons, Sykes and Paul. They, too, send greetings to PAMC friends.

Editor's Note

Due to a business assignment out of town from July 30 - August 6, the editor regrets that the August issue of this newsletter will not be available until August 14. Please send all news items to the church office, so work can begin promptly on August 8. Thanks.

Happy Summer Days To All!
"IN PRAISE OF JOY"

INTRODUCTION  When I was a child, I used to go to a Sunday School held in a one room church in a little village north of Schenectady. And every Sunday morning, without fail, we followed the same procedure.

We always sang a few songs, while waiting for the latecomers to arrive. I can picture the Sunday School Superintendent standing up front and asking, "Are there any requests?" Before we children could even get the books open, one of the adults would call out a number, the pianist would swing into it, and off we went. We always seemed to sing the songs the adults wanted to sing; we were seldom given a chance to call out one of our favorites, but I assumed that this was one of those things that went along with being an adult - you got to choose the songs.

I was really too young to read the words and so I used to turn around in my place - the little chairs were always set up in front of the big chairs - and I'd have fun watching the adults sing. But there was something that often puzzled me. Whenever they proclaimed they had "joy, joy, joy - down in their hearts", they would sing with such bored and sour expressions on their faces that it just didn't add up. It mystified me. The quality of joy that they were singing about seemed to be missing from their lives.

DEVELOPMENT  As I say, it bothered me then...and it bothers me now. Why were these people - good, solid church-goers - so short of joy? Who knows, maybe you've thought about this, too - for I don't think it's a situation which existed only in the past in that little village. There may be someone who acts the same way with you in the pew right now, or in your home, or more important - in your mirror.

Some of you have heard about the young lady who was cleaning up her apartment here in the city. Quite accidentally she vacuumed up her canary. The canary survived. But she reported, "He doesn't sing much any more.....mostly just sits and stares". Many people in our churches today are like this...sitting and staring....so little in the way of joy and enthusiasm...."down in their hearts"

Of course there have been periods in the past when people have been reluctant to show joy in their lives because they felt it was somehow more spiritual to be serious. Life is not a game, they say. It's a pretty serious business. Religion is not for the frivolous. We live at all times under the watchful eye of God, the righteous judge. He sees all things. He knows all things. So, you better be good!

I was in a church not too long ago where the congregation prayed in their prayer of confession, "Have mercy upon us miserable worms". I suppose if you've been brought up on a diet of being reminded that you're a miserable worm, there's not that much room for joy "down in your heart".

LOOK AT JESUS  It's hard for me to understand how any Christian could look at Jesus - who He was and what He did - and not begin to ask some questions about joy. For when you read the account of His life, you can't escape the atmosphere of joy that surrounded Him. And I think we've lost it!

Remember that when the Pharisees criticized Him, they did so because He was living joyfully - not according to the severity of their rules and regulations. He and His disciples did not fast, He told them, because His being with them was
like a marriage feast - exempt from such requirements. And so many of his wonder-
ful stories were about people who were surprised by joy when they least expected
it - the joy of the woman who found a lost coin, the joy of the shepherd who
brought home the lost sheep, the joy of the father who welcomed home the
prodigal son, saying:

"It is right that we should make merry
and be glad, for this, my son was lost
and is found. He was dead and is alive
again".

Remember to whom Jesus was speaking - poor people, people who were living in an
occupied country, people burdened with unjust taxes, weary with back-breaking de-
mands for ritual piety.

He came preaching joy to people whose lives were largely without joy. His
message to them was wrapped up in a sermon which was to be one of His most
famous utterances - the Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which was read earlier
in the service - The Beatitudes. Here's his prescription for happiness and for
joy. One of His last statements made to His disciples was, "These things have I
spoken that my joy might remain with you and your joy might be full".

There it is, friends, and I believe He would say the same things to us to-
day if He were here. Without minimizing the seriousness of Christian discipline,
nor short-changing the mood of contrition and repentance, I would affirm that
one of the real marks of the Christian life is genuine joy and celebration.

You ask, well if that's the case...if one of the marks of the Christian
life is joy, then why is there so much gloom and pessimism around? A good
question. As I was turning this over in my own mind in recent days, I remembered
a quotation that I had tucked away in a file that someone had passed on to me.
It's a beautiful and brilliant paragraph and it gave me direction for the message
of today and next Sunday. Let me read it to you and listen carefully.

"Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, the lack
of wealth or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment
in marriage or having a boresome job - grievously
hard as they may be to bear.

It lies in the fading of your youthful vision, and our
greatest sorrow is always the death of the sparkling
spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep
joy in the world and living, that pure faith and
believing heart, the bubbling of the divine joy within
us".

SPIRIT OF WONDER Why so many gloomy Christians? - because we have lost some
important things.

First, because we have lost that "sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as
children". And this is a great loss, indeed! No matter how grim things are,
part of life is a game for children. The bathroom rug becomes a boat, a chair is
a fort, and off they go into a world of pretend at a moment's notice.

Children are so free from sham and cover up. They cheerfully report to
teachers and friends and grandparents conversations which take place in their
homes which their parents would never dream of having aired in public. My eight year old daughter was visiting her grandparents back in September. She walked into the kitchen and said to her grandmother, "Nanna... today's going to be a bad day... it's going to be sooo bad". "Why, Caroline?" said her grandmother, "Why... it's lovely outside. Is something wrong?" "Oh, Nanna" she replied, "The mail just came and I see your Con Ed bill and grandpa is going to open it and be terribly upset". I was told of this several days later and I realized how much gloom I project on those dark days when Con Edison sends a bill.

We adults can learn much from children. We take ourselves so seriously at times. We're consumed by responsibilities in life and forget that it is here for us to enjoy. How long has it been since you burst into spontaneous laughter, or suddenly began humming or whistling to yourself, or laughed at a mistake. It may be longer than you think.

Henry Ward Beecher, that great preacher of another era, had his share of enemies for he was a man of outspoken sentiments. He was criticized widely and if he had taken it to heart, it would have been difficult for him. On one occasion he received a letter which contained the word "FOOL". The next Sunday he told his congregation cheerfully that he had known of people who wrote letters and forgot to sign their names, but this was his first experience with someone who signed his name, but forgot to write the letter.

We take ourselves too seriously most of the time. Every now and then we need to shake ourselves up a bit and ask why we have allowed ourselves to become so stiffled in our imaginations that we miss the wonder in life's experiences.

WONDER STORY One of my favorite wonder stories is told by a friend who went with his family on a trip to Niagara Falls. They took the famous boat trip on the Maid of the Mist which goes up the gorge until it is literally into the spray of the falls. The passengers had been laughing and talking and shivering in the gray day, but just as they reached the spray the sun came out in full force and the spray was lit up with ten thousand rainbows.

The people who had been talking and laughing fell silent in the magic of this transcendent moment of beauty. And as the hush fell over the boat, a voice was heard to say, "Boy, they sure didn't put much mustard on this hot dog". And the friend remarked, "Isn't that just like us...to be in the presence of one of life's wonder moments and miss it completely because we are concerned about the mustard on our hot dogs".

What about yourself? Are you "one of the mustard on the hot dog" persons? Perhaps you are and perhaps you need to be reminded that to see wonders, one must be ready for them. They can come at unexpected times and in the most unusual places. We must get ourselves open and be ready to receive the joys that surround us. We need to look with the seeing eye, to listen with the hearing ear and the understanding heart.

Have we lost that "sparkling sense of wonder" that we possessed as children? There are some who feel we have. I don't think it's lost...merely latent. For some, youthful visions have faded and that "sparkling sense of wonder" is buried deep...covered up. But it can be brought back, renewed. And this we shall consider next Sunday in the second part of "In Praise of Joy". A friend of mind sent along some words from a young widow who was left with two small children.
She headed the words, "Wonder". Let me read them to you:

"I am always astonished  
when the phone rings and I hear the  
voice of my friend.  
I am always astonished  
when I look at my children's faces,  
or watch them at a distance -  
running, playing, yelling, laughing.  
I am always astonished  
at the smell of the earth after a rain  
when all is fresh and new  
and everything seems possible.  
I am always astonished  
that my tears and loneliness,  
my emptiness and longing do not  
overwhelm me, and life is  
unexpectedly glorious"

LET US PRAY   Teach us, O Lord, not to hold on to life too tightly.  
Teach us to hold it lightly; not carelessly, but lightly, easily.  
Teach us to take it as a gift, to enjoy it and to cherish it, and to let it go  
gracefully and thankfully when the time comes.

The gift is great, but the Giver is greater still. Thou, O God, art the  
Giver and in thee is the Life that never dies. In the spirit of Jesus who brought  
joy and light to life, we pray. Amen
Things got off to a bad start for me on Friday morning -

At 7:30, while eating a bowl of corn flakes, I somehow chipped a tooth...

At 7:45, the telephone rang and it was a friend with word that there had been a death among her circle of friends. Could I help...? What should she do...

At 8:00, a second phone call. The church secretary had eaten fish for supper on Thursday night. She was sick and couldn't come in...

At 8:15, the new puppy in our home, made a mess on the kitchen floor after everyone else had left.

I thought...Oh...it's going to be a bad one today. It's starting poorly. And I was in a dark mood.

Several hours later, sitting in the dentist's chair with a drill in my mouth, the dentist said, "Well, today's D-Day...? (I didn't know what he meant)...? (I nodded my head). "Did you hear the news?" (I shook my head no). "There's trouble at Gracie Mansion...?they're going to tear it down...there's a weak beam".

And with that, I pushed the drill out of my mouth and had a good chuckle. That touch of humor...?that bit of laughter changed my dead...?I thought of the poor mayor and all of his problems...?and figured I could cope with my concerns.
TEXT: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full"  
(John 15: 11)

INTRODUCTION  If one of the genuine marks of the Christian life is joy, why then is there so much gloom around. This is the question that we're thinking about in these two sermons. Last Sunday at the coffee hour in responding to what was said, someone reminded me of the definition of Calvinism: nagging
"The feeling that somewhere...somehow, someone....may be having a good time"

John Calvin, who along with Martin Luther, was one of those great reformers of the 16th century is to the Presbyterian Church what John Wesley is to the Methodist Church. Calvinism flowed in the veins of those Puritans who settled New England, and of whom John Marquand was remarked, "The rock bound coast of Maine felt like an amateur when it saw the grimness of the Pilgrim fathers".

Last Sunday's message as well as today's sermon inspired in part by a beautiful quotation sent to me by a friend. Let me read it to you again for it helps to set the direction of this message, too.

"Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, lack of wealth or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment in marriage or having a boresome job, grievously hard as they may be to bear....

It lies in the fading of our youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the death of that sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep joy in the world and in living, that pure faith and believing heart - the bubbling of the divine joy within us."

We thought about that "sparkling sense of wonder we possess as children", and concluded that for many it is not dead, not lost - merely latent, dormant, buried deep down in our lives. But, it's there, and we need to let it out, so to speak, recapture it, recover it. We take ourselves too seriously most of the time, and end up losing that feeling of joy and wonder that was once ours.

DEEP JOY IN THE WORLD AND IN LIVING  A second reason so many Christians are inclined to be gloomy is because they've lost that "deep joy in the world and in living".

Now, I'm willing to admit that there are a lot of things that I don't like about the world as I find it and I often wish it were otherwise, but day by day, it is still very sweet to be alive. Who was it who use to say on TV: "How sweet it is!" One of the problems we all face is that we take so much for granted. A teenager recently wrote the following letter to Abby:

"Dear Abby: Happiness is knowing your parents won't almost kill you if you come home a little late."
Happiness is having your own bedroom. Happiness is having your parents trust you. Happiness is getting the telephone call you've been praying for...happiness is having parents who don't fight. Happiness is something I don't have. (Signed) Fifteen and Unhappy.

Even more interesting to me was one of the letters printed in rebuttal:

"Dear Abby: Happiness is being able to walk. Happiness is being able to talk. Happiness is being able to hear. Unhappiness is reading a letter from a fifteen year old girl who can do all these things and still says she isn't happy. I can talk. I can see. I can hear. But I can't walk. (Signed) Thirteen and Happy.

We need to ask ourselves what are the joys we're taking for granted that need to be appreciated more than they are? Or, what are the joys you have in the world that time is not going to diminish or take away? A line that I often quote to myself and to others (from Kibran) - "I cried because I had no shoes, until I saw a man who had no feet".

One of the ways I know that the world is putting too much stress upon us is in the number of friends and acquaintances who are succumbing to heart attacks. I don't know what there is in us that pushes us to punish our bodies beyond the limits of their physical endurance....yet you know, and I know, persons who have locked themselves into a course of work that gives them little or no time for the renewal of the spirit, or a life style which has in it no place for rest, relaxation, refreshment.

Some of the people I talk to, after one brush with death, have come to realize this important lesson about life - that life is too short and too precious to throw away. It's there to be enjoyed! For many of them, the testimony is that when they have had to stop and re-think what they are doing, they find a new awareness of dimensions of life that they had not known before.

Listen to these words from one who found his way back from death's door and described something of his feelings of newness to a friend:

"He was overcome with a sense of the freshness of life such as he had not known for many years. In the hospital, he looked at the fabric of the bedclothes and at his own hands, thinking how marvelously they were contrived. Every object on which his eyes fell, every experience was remarkable and new. And later at home: to him the sudden flattening of a patch of grass in the wind could be the very footstep of God. To him the coming of Spring was not the logical result of the ponderous wheel of earth, an annual occurrence scarcely to be noticed, but an enormous personal gift that could bring tears to his eyes."

There are many events in life that can stir this kind of feeling in us if only we are sensitive to them. The beauty of the world...sounds and sights... touches and tastes...relationships and feelings. Are we taking them for granted? Could be.
George Saunders was one of Hollywood's best paid and busiest villains. Staring in something like 90 films, winning an Academy Award, but living a rather sad and empty life, he once said in an interview:

"I am content with mediocrity. I hate interviews because I do not get paid for them. I hate to give autographs and never so. I am always rude to people. I am not a sweet person. I am a disagreeable person. I am a hateful person. I like to be hateful."

Married four times and divorced three, he eventually became hateful even to himself. About three years ago last Spring, he checked into an exclusive seaside hotel in Barcelona and took his life with an overdose of sleeping pills. He left a note in Spanish asking the authorities to notify his sister in London. And he left another note in which he wrote:

"Dear World: I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this 'sweet cesspool'. Good luck."

I ask you whether you would rather be a person who thinks of this world as a 'sweet cesspool' or one who cannot experience Spring without it "bringing tears to his eyes"? A second reason then why we ought to be filled with joy is that we have been given a world to experience and the ability to experience it. Don't let it slip away from you!

Pure faith and believing heart. Why so much gloom? Because we have lost that "sparkling sense of wonder we possess as children", that "deep joy in the world and in living", and the last is even more important - "a pure faith and the believing heart".

These are possible, I believe, only to those persons who have come to know that they are loved and cared about by someone else. And perhaps this is where today's sermon comes very close to home - here on a Sunday when we have the joy of children in our service.

For faith is developed in a relationship of trust. The believing heart is nurtured by relationships of trustworthiness between parents in experience after experience. As they say, faith is caught more often than taught. If a child has come to know that the adults nearest to him are dependable, living under authority, that he can give them his complete trust, it is not difficult to talk to them about God who is like a good parent who never lets them down.

If, on the other hand, children come to know parents and other adults who are arbitrary who can be manipulated because they have no standards or core of integrity, then children will find it difficult to believe that this will not be the quality of all their relationships.

Let me take you back to that one-room Sunday School in that village church upstate which I referred to last Sunday. I can't remember anything of the many lessons I was taught there. But, I do remember the persons who nourished my faith - not only there, but in others places and times in the years that followed. I remember the distance that some of them had to travel to get there. I remember some persons who said things and did things that rang bells in my life as I was
growing up - people whose lives put down the base of faith on which I built the faith that is my own. They had pure faith and believing hearts and it helped them have integrity. And it is people like this more than anything else who are needed right now in our world.

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, was quoted recently as saying,

"Most of the young people of the world are worrying about the meaninglessness of their lives. They need purpose; they are living in a society where the transmission of commitment has broken down".

This is the task for all of us who are parents, teachers or adults who influence others. They need to know from us what our basic commitments are, and that we are serious about them.

CLOSING

I shared with you a story two weeks ago that to me is beautiful and borders on unbelievable. Forgive me for using it again so soon. But some of you weren't here; you were out enjoying the leaves and I'm glad you had the opportunity. A woman was driving her husband's car and was involved in an accident. The car was badly smashed; she was unhurt. But when she reached into the glove compartment for the insurance form, a note fell out with it. Written by her husband, it said: "Remember dear...it's you that I love".

This brings us to the heart of the Christian Gospel, for this is, after all, what God is saying to us in Jesus Christ. No matter how much we may have botched up our lives, we are on the receiving end of His love, His mercy, His forgiveness. This is our faith as Christians, and - if there were no other cause for joy than this, it would be enough.

Listen to the message again that launched these two sermons "In Praise of Joy" -

"Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, lack of wealth, or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment in marriage or having a boresome job, grievously hard as they may be to bear. It lies in the fading of our youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the death of that sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep joy in the world and in living, that pure faith and believing heart, that bubbling of the divine joy within us".

I would ask you this day and in the days to come - don't let it happen to you!

PRAYER

We thank thee, O God, for the joy that has come into our lives through Christ Jesus. May we never forget that religion without that joy is not His religion. As we live and grow in it, may we be willing to share that joy with others. We ask this in the spirit of Him who came to turn the water of life into wine. Amen
"IN PRAISE OF JOY"

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We always sang a few sons while waiting for the good church people to arrive. I can still picture the Sunday School Superintendent standing up front and asking, "Are there any requests?" And before we children could even get the hymn book open, one of the adults would call out a number...the pianist would swing into it...and off we'd go. We always seemed to sing the songs that the adults wanted to sing. We never had a chance really to call out one of our favorites, but I assumed that this was one of those things that went along with being an adult...you got to choose the sons, the hymns...in church.

I was really too young to read the words and so I use to turn around in my place...you know...the little chairs were always set up in front of the big chairs, and I'd have the fun of watching the adults sing. But there was something that often puzzled me. Whenever they proclaimed they had "joy, joy, joy...down in their hearts", they would sing with such bored and sour looks on their faces that it just didn't seem to add up. It use to mystify me. The quality of joy that they were singing about seemed to be missing from their lives.

DEVELOPMENT  As I say, it bothered me then and it bothers me now. Why were these people - good, solid church-goers - so short of joy? Granted, these were the depression years and the Dow Jones wasn't doing that well. Who knows....maybe you've thought about this, too...for I don't think it's a situation which existed only in the nineteen thirties in that little village of Rexford, New York...on the banks of the lovely Mohawk River outside of Schenectady. There may be someone who acts that same way with you in the pew right now, or perhaps in your home...or at work, or even more important - in your mirror.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of the young lady who was tidying up her apartment here in the city...one Sunday morning. Quite accidentally, she vacuumed up her pet canary. Somehow the canary survived the ordeal, but she reported..."He doesn't sing much any more...mostly just sits and stares". Many people in our churches today are like that...sitting and staring...so little in the way of joy and enthusiasm which Christians should have....."deep down in their hearts".

A number of years ago, Lynn and I visited the little Wesleyan Chapel in England, in Masham up in Yorkshire from whence my parents came. They met there and courted there and were married there and two weeks later set sail for this country. Believe me, it was a high moment for me to look around that Church or chapel which, interestingly enough, bears the name of Park Street Methodist Church. But one of my memories of that visit has to do with a turn of the century photograph of a woman named Jessie Weatherspoon, a stalwart of that Methodist fellowship. Underneath the photograph was her name with this line,

"She never sat down to a meal without her Bible next to her plate..."
I don't know what she was reading that day when they took her picture, but I know this....I've never seen a more dour, sour, sad expression on a person's face. It was SOMETHING! Maybe it was something she ate and not read. Who knows, but I thought that picture was enough to send little children running the other direction. Indigestion? Whatever?

Of course there have been periods in the past when people have been reluctant to show any joy in their lives because they felt it was somehow more spiritual to be serious. Life is not a game, they will say. Life is difficult, they will tell you - and it is. It is pretty serious business. Religion is not for the frivolous. We live at all times under the wful eye of the Almighty, the righteous Judge. He (or She) knows all things and sees all things...so, you'd better be good.

Remember that line in one of the prayers of confession found in the Presbyterian Church. I remember it from student days in Scotland, at the University of Edinburgh. "Have mercy upon us 'miserable worms". If you've been brought up on a steady diet of such theology, on the diet of being told each week that you're just a "miserable worm", then it would be difficult to conjure up much room for some joy..."down in the heart!"

LOOK AT JESUS

It's hard for me to understand how any Christian could look at Jesus...who He was and what He did...and not begin to ask some probing questions about joy. For when you read the account of His life, you can't escape the atmosphere of joy that surrounded Him, and I think we're in danger of losing it, if we haven't already lost it.

Remember this that when the Pharisees criticized Him, they did so because He was living joyfully...and not according to the severity of their many rules and regulations. He and His disciples did not fast, He told them, because His being "with them"....well it was like a marriage feast, exempt from such requirements. And so many of His wonderful stories were about people who were surprised by joy when they least expected it - the joy of the woman who found a lost coin, the joy of the shepherd who brought home that lost sheep, the joy of the father who welcomed home the Prodigal Son, saying,

"It is right that we should make merry and be glad, for this, my son was lost and is found....dead and is alive again!"

Jesus came preaching joy to people whose lives were largely without joy. They were poor people, living in an occupied country, burdened with taxes and bent over from back-breaking demands for ritual piety. His message was pretty well wrapped up in a sermon which was to be one of His most famous utterances-the Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which Yvonne read to you earlier.

Let me say this. Without minimizing the seriousness of Christian discipline, nor short-changing the mood of contrition and genuine repentance, I would affirm that one of the real marks of the Christian life is genuine joy and celebration. One of His last statements to His disciples went like this,

"These things have I spoken that My joy might remain with you and your joy might be full."
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You ask...we wonder...if that's the case...if one of the marks of the Christian life is joy, then WHY so much gloom and pessimism around? Why is it lacking in our lives and in the life of the Church. Maybe it's because we really haven't let the MESSAGE take hold in our hearts. Yes, the world "out there" can be so strong. As I was reflecting on this I remembered a quotation that I had clipped and tucked away, given to me by a friend. It's a beautiful paragraph and as I share it with you, listen carefully and let it sink in and touch you where you're at.

"Life's supreme tragedy is not poor health, the lack of wealth or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment in marriage or having a boresome job....grievously hard as they may be to bear.... It lies in the fading of your youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the death of the sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep joy in the world and living and loving...that pure faith and believing heart, the bubbling of the divine joy within us."

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How long has it been since you burst into spontaneous laughter or suddenly began humming or whistling to yourself...or laughed at one of your own mistakes. Try it. It may be longer than you think. I came across a clipping in my sermon file that has this title, "Try Laughter, The Best Exercise". It's good...worth reading. If you want a copy, ask me for it.

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One of my favorite "wonder stories" is told by a friend who went with his family on a trip up to Niagara Falls. They took the famous boat ride on the Maid of the Mist which goes up the gorge until it is literally into the spray of the falls. The passengers had been laughing and talking and shivering in the gray, cool day, but just as they reached the spray the sun came out in full force and the spray was lit up with ten thousand rainbows. The people who had been talking and laughing fell silent in the magic of this transcendent moment of beauty. And as the hush fell over the boat, a voice was heard to say,

"Boy.....they sure didn't put much mustard on this hot dog...."
And the friend remarked,

"Isn't that just like us...to be in the presence of one of life's wonder moments and miss it completely because we are concerned about the mustard on our hot dogs?"

**ASK YOURSELF**

Let me start to bring all of this together. What about yourself? Are you "one of the mustard on the hot dog" persons? Perhaps you are and perhaps you need to be reminded that to "see wonders", one must be ready for them. Oh, they can come at unexpected times and in the most unusual places. We must get ourselves open and be ready to receive the joys that surround us. We need to "look with the seeing eye" and we need to "listen with the hearing ear".

So often we lose that "sparkling sense of wonder" that we had as children. I'd like to think it not lost...merely latent. For some of you, those youthful visions have faded and that "sparkling sense of wonder" that Jesus brought is buried deep...covered up, shall we say. But I believe it can be brought back and renewed - through worship and prayer, through the continuing cultivation of some holy habits....as we "wait upon the Lord".

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**PRAYER**

Teach is, Lord, not to hold on to life too tightly, but teach us to hold it...lightly - not carelessly, but lightly, easily. Teach us to take it as a gift....enjoying it and cherishing it, and to let it go gracefully and thankfully when the time comes. For,

The gift is so very great, but the GIVER is greater still. And Thou, O God, art the Giver and in You is the life that never dies. In the name and in the spirit of Jesus, we now pray. Amen.
"IN PRAISE OF JOY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 28, 1998
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"She never sat down to a meal without her Bible next to her plate..."

Like it says on that old tombstone, "She lived a pious life, but not with enthusiasm."
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