

Sermon for December 11, 2011

Filled with Laughter

Psalm 126 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The Reverend Roger Pancost

A couple of weeks ago my sister-in-law, Laura, asked if I could pick her son, Owen, up from his after-school program at Plymouth Elementary. It was the night of this year's first snow storm and Laura was afraid that she would not make it back from her job in Saginaw in time to get Owen before the closing time.

When I entered the gymnasium where Owen and other children were waiting to be picked up, I was greeted by a question, "Is it going to snow tonight?" The children were filled with excitement about the possibility of the first real snow fall. I laughed with joy in response to their excitement and pointed out that my coat had snow flakes melting on it. The children were delighted to hear the news.

As Owen and I made our way out into the snow-filled night he exclaimed with great joy that the snow was already accumulating. He traced his foot in the slushy snow, in order to confirm this point. Then Owen tilted his head back like a character from the Charlie Brown Christmas Special and attempted to catch snow flakes on his tongue.

My adult self felt the urge to hurry Owen along because I had things to do later that evening. Before I could utter a word, I came to realize that I should stop and appreciate this moment of joy. What could be better than watching a child enjoy the first snow of winter? Before we climbed into the car we stood in the dark night, laughing as the snow flakes fell from the sky.

That memory came to my mind as I read Psalm 126 in preparation for today's sermon. This Psalm is known as a Psalm of Ascent, which means that it was sung by Pilgrims who climbed the hill to the temple in Jerusalem. In this song the people recount the way in which God delivered their ancestors from exile and brought them back to Jerusalem.

Psalm 126 speaks of the great joy that is experienced when God frees people from oppression. Generally speaking, joy is an emotion of great delight caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying. With joy comes a sense of pleasure or elation.

As Psalm 126 reveals, a common response to joy is laughter. As the people reflect on God's liberating act they proclaim, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy, and it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.'" (Psalm 126:2 & 3)

There may not be any among us this morning who have been freed from an oppressive government, but there are many among us who have been freed from other forms of oppression. There are those who have been empowered by God to find

freedom from addiction. Others have been given the courage to leave abusive partnerships.

Many an individual can look back over his or her life and see ways in which God has brought restoration and healing. For those of us who have mourned the death of a loved one, we can look back and see ways in which our lives were restored through the care and concern of other people.

Other people can look back and remember times when they were filled with stress or anxiety over some particular situation. In time, circumstances changed and the anxiety was released. Following this release there was joy.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul offers words of encouragement to a group of people who experience great stress in their lives. Knowing that the people suffer from persecution Paul offers some strange sounding advice. He tells the people to rejoice always.

I believe that in charging the people to rejoice always Paul is encouraging them to affirm their confidence in God's loving-presence. Because God is always with the people, they have reason to be joyful. The same can be said to each one of us. Because God's loving presence is always with us, we have reason to be joyful.

As I was reminded on a snowy night a few weeks ago, it is easy to lose sight of joy. We adults tend to get caught up in the responsibilities and complexities of life to the point of sometimes becoming joy-less. On this third Sunday of Advent, in which our bible readings speak of joy, we are reminded of our calling to be joy-filled people. Although this season can be difficult for a number of individuals, as they are reminded of losses, and as they are overwhelmed with responsibilities, it is a season filled with many joy. If we open ourselves to seeing, and experiencing these joys, they will have a positive impact on us, as well as a positive impact on those around us.

One of the joys of this season involves the opportunities that we have to connect with other people. For some this means spending time with family members. For others, it is festive gatherings with friends. It may mean taking the time to have a cup of coffee with someone we care about. It includes Christmas cards and information-filled form letters.

There is the joy that comes from holiday decorations. Even though this may seem like a shallow thing, the little kid in me rejoices when I see a beautiful Christmas tree, or lights shining in the darkness.

Along these same lines, there is joy in the delicious foods that people prepare and share.

There is joy in the special events that take place this time of year. We live in a town that is blessed with wonderful musicians. Throughout the season we have countless opportunities to hear joyful music.

There is joy in sharing. We experience joy when we do something nice for people we love. We also experience joy when we are involved in charity work. I read recently that scientist have determined that the feelings of joy associated with doing good can be traced to a particular pleasure center of the brain that can actually be viewed, and measured, with brain scans. Who knew that we are hard-wired to feel joy when we are doing good for others?

An online article that I read reminds us that doing good for others doesn't always involve money. The article offered these possibilities:

- Visit seniors in a retirement community or assisted living facility and sit for a chat.
- Knock on the door of an elderly neighbor and find out if you can help out with any chores.
- Take in the trash cans for everyone on your street, or help clear the snow from a neighbor's sidewalk.
- Surprise a friend by bringing him or her breakfast or lunch.
- Tell a server or retail associate that he or she is doing a good job.
- If you practice a religion, go to your house of worship and participate in community togetherness.
- Hold a door, smile at someone or offer to get something down from a tall shelf in a store. Little acts of kindness can bring great pleasure.
- Share something you have with another person. This may mean generator-supplied power during an outage, a snack at school lunch, a tool, a piece of clothing, or whatever you can think of.

(Lipennysaver.com)

I know what a giving group of people you are. You can easily add dozens of other ways of giving to this list.

During the remaining days of Advent I encourage all of us to become more like children as we experience the world around us. Yes, there is a lot that is discouraging and disappointing in life. But there are also many things that bring us joy.

The next time it snows, tilt your head back and see if you can catch a snow flake on your tongue. And then may your mouth be filled with laughter.