



“Make a Joyful Noise”
August 16, 2009
Psalm 98:4-9, John 15:9-11
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For many years, young people growing up in the Presbyterian Church had to memorize the Shorter Catechism before they were received into active church membership. The Shorter Catechism is a list of questions and answers based on the Westminster Confession of Faith, a declaration of Christian faith hammered out in England in the middle of the 17th century. Some of our more senior members had to memorize the Shorter Catechism when they were children and they will tell you that there is nothing short about it. It entails 107 questions and answers. Its name is derived from the fact that it is shorter than the Larger Catechism which has 196 questions. Imagine what would happen if our session decided to require all of our members to memorize the Shorter Catechism in order to maintain their membership in Westminster? I suspect a number of you would suddenly feel drawn to another congregation.

Many who did the arduous work of memorizing the Shorter Catechism as children admit that over the years they have forgotten some of the answers. But all of them remember the first question and answer. The first question, written by a room full of men centuries before the advent of inclusive language, is: *What is the chief end of man?* Today, we would say, *What is the chief end of human beings?* And the answer is: *to glorify God, and to enjoy [God] forever.*

When we recall that this document was drafted by austere Puritan men in the 1640s, it is a remarkable answer. We might have expected them to create a long list “Thou shalt nots” – especially “Thou shalt not have any fun!” Yet, they declared that our primary purpose in life is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

Usually, when people describe the Christian faith, they talk about the importance of being kind and loving, they speak of sin and forgiveness, they mention the necessity of treating others the same way we want to be treated and they affirm hope in life after death. Rarely will people volunteer a word about joy. Yet, when we commit ourselves to the way of Christ, it is neither to coax God into loving us, nor to win a heavenly reward, but rather because God yearns for us to be filled with joy.

This is not some New Age feel-good theology. It is what the Scriptures declare repeatedly. The psalm we read this morning proclaims, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.” We are also encouraged to make a “joyful

noise” in Psalms 66, 95 and 100. Or, what about Psalm 5? “Let all who take refuge in [God] rejoice; let them ever sing for joy.” Psalm 30 says, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.” More than 50 of the 150 psalms include the word joy, joyful or rejoice. And these words are peppered throughout most of the other Old Testament books.

It is the same story in the New Testament. In this morning’s reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus says that his whole purpose for teaching his followers how to live is this: “so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” If we turn to the Gospel of Luke, we discover that the author frames the life of Jesus around joy. When the angel announces his birth to the shepherds in the fields, the angel says, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” And then, at the end of Luke’s gospel, we read that the disciples worshiped Jesus “and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”

Of course, it is not only the gospel writers; joy is a recurring theme in the letters of the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the church in Rome, he writes: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace.” (Romans 15:13). When Paul writes the Galatians, he contrasts the works of the flesh that destroy our lives, with the fruit of God’s Spirit that bring us true life. The first fruit of the Holy Spirit Paul mentions is love, and the second is joy.

Sometime ago I clipped a brief article from the newspaper which listed examples of statements that had been posted in business establishments in foreign countries. These statements were written to provide instruction to people who did not speak the native language, but spoke only English. Of course, whenever we translate something from one language to another, we run the risk of not conveying precisely what is intended.

For instance, there is a sign in a hotel in Paris which tells the English-speaking guests: “Please leave your values at the front desk.” If you are flying, and one of your stops is in Copenhagen, you may not be all that thrilled to discover that one of the airlines promises to “take your bags and send them in all directions.” Or, if you are ever travelling in Bangkok, you may want to check out the dry cleaners that boasts: “Drop your trousers here for best results.”

Sometimes when people translate statements from one language to another, they mutilate the message. Well, some garble the Christian message. Some preach a prosperity gospel claiming that God wants us to be financially prosperous. Or they claim that the Christian faith is primarily an individual spiritual experience unrelated to other people. Or, as we have heard more in recent days, “Those who do not believe as we do are wrong and to be condemned;” giving license to being mean-spirited.

However, the New Testament declares that a mark of true believers is that they are joyful. That is astonishing considering that life for first century Christians was filled with overwhelming hardship; most were poor and many were persecuted.

A colleague reflects on two different scenes. The first is a dark scene from the movie, *American Anthem*. A young man has suffered a terrible tragedy. He has lost his leg in an accident and he cannot accept the fact that he must face the remainder of his life with an artificial

limb. He refuses to leave his room. He shuts everyone out, including the young woman he once loved. He keeps the blinds pulled, passing the time in semidarkness and playing melancholy music. Gloom and despair fill his life.

Contrast this dreary scene with one reported by author, Robert Bruce. Walking down a bustling city street, surrounded by the roar of traffic, honking horns and people talking, he heard something beautiful that pierced the racket. Someone was singing cheerfully. He scanned the area to locate the source of this upbeat sound and when he spotted the person who was singing he was amazed. The joyful sound was coming from a young man in a wheelchair, who was pushing himself along with the only useful limbs he had – his arms.¹ Joy is not simply a response to external events; it is an attitude. While nearly everyone responds with joy to experiences that bring happiness, only some maintain a joyful spirit when life is harsh.

A tragedy or a huge disappointment may send us into the pit of despair, changing our lives forever. But after the shock has passed and the intense pain has lessened, we face a critical decision. We can dwell on the negative or we can make the best of life. We can give in to cynicism, or we can search for every reason we can find to be joyful.

All of us know people who are sullen most of the time. Life has been tough for them, yet even when they have reason to celebrate, they can ferret out something to bemoan. They cling to a list of regrets they can recite on a moment's notice. We steel ourselves in their presence struggling to keep our spirits from sinking as they catalogue their complaints.

Fortunately we also know people who are the exact opposite. People who are optimistic and constantly searching for the bright side even in the midst of adversity. Not those who plaster their face with an artificial smile; rather those who are genuinely joyful.

Sometimes I pray that if I ever contracted a terminal illness, that I may have the same spirit as those who have cancer, yet maintain a positive outlook and believe they are going to beat it. Sometimes I pray to be like those who have lost a loved one, yet despite their sadness, still find reasons to laugh.

What is the essential difference between the person who becomes somber when the menacing clouds form, and the one who keeps her eyes peeled for the first light to appear? Gratitude; a vibrant faith that thanks God daily for the gift of life.

Many people possess a meager faith because they have not nurtured a grateful heart. They routinely focus on what they lack rather than all that they have. They constantly count the things for which they yearn, but rarely count their blessings. They focus on scarcity rather than abundance.

People in developing countries witness the standard of living we enjoy in the United States, and they imagine it to be a dream world. They cannot fathom owning their own automobile, much less owning more than one. They cannot conceive of having a home with separate bedrooms and air conditioning. They cannot imagine grocery stores with shelves so stocked that it is difficult to make a choice among all the items. They cannot comprehend what

it would be like to be able to afford to eat out at a restaurant once a week, or to whip out their cell phone and have a pizza delivered to their door.

Not only do many of our citizens take such things for granted, but millions turn to drugs and alcohol because they feel empty. The percentage of teenagers in our country who have contemplated suicide is chilling. Too many have opted for the advertisers lie: "Acquire more stuff and you will be happy." You do not become joyful by getting what you want. Joy stems from being thankful for what you have.

We have the precious gift of life. We have a loving Creator who yearns for us to be joyful and gives us hope for tomorrow. We have freedom to embark on a spiritual adventure by following Christ. We have a church family that can support us during difficult times and provide us with meaningful ways to help others. We have people who love us and people who need our love.

The talented English writer Katherine Mansfield died when she was only 33 years old. During her final year, she wrote these words in her journal: "I do not want to die without leaving a record of my belief that suffering can be overcome. For I do believe it. This is a time to lose oneself more utterly and to love more deeply."² At any point in our lives, even when we are reaching the end, intimate connections with others can ignite sparks of joy within us.

Christ said that he wanted his joy to be in us, and he wanted our joy to be complete. Joy begins with a grateful heart. It does not emerge from the absence of problems, nor is it the result of a trouble-free existence. Our joy can become what Christ intends if we are thankful for the blessings of our lives.

A friend of mine drove up to a toll booth recently and his smallest bill was a ten. He knew he could need some quarters for another toll and so when he handed the ten to the woman in the booth he said, "Could you give me an extra dollar in quarters." Then he said, "You know what I mean, not really an *extra* dollar."

She chuckled to herself as she began counting out his change. Then, he said, "So, how's your day?" She looked at him with the brightest, broadest smile and said, "Honey, my day is great. I thank the Lord for every day. After all, I don't have to be here." And by that, she did not mean she did not have to work; she meant it was not a given that she had to exist.³

You can take that toll booth theology to the bank. Each day of our lives we need to keep in mind that we don't have to be here. But we are. Life is a gift. Live it with joy.

NOTES

1. The stories of the two young men are told by Roger Bruns in his sermon preached on June 23, 2002 at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Richmond, Virginia.
2. James Miller, *What Will Help Me*, (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Willowgreen Publishing, 2000), p.30.
3. Larry Chapin, Chester Presbyterian Church newsletter, August and September 2009.