

JOY, JOY, JOY! – DECEMBER 17, 2006

Preached by the Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, Schellsburg, PA
The Third Sunday in Advent
Luke 3:7-18, Philippians 4:4-9

Different religions teach the same basic truth in different ways. This particular story comes from the Buddhist tradition:

Once a farmer went to tell the Buddha about his problems. He described his difficulties farming – how either droughts or monsoons complicated his work. He told the Buddha about his wife – how even though he loved her, there were certain things about her he wished to change. Likewise with his children – yes, he loved them, but they weren't turning out quite the way he wanted. When he was finished, he asked how the Buddha could help him with his problems.

The Buddha replied, "I'm sorry but I can't help you."

"What do you mean?" railed the farmer. "You're supposed to be a great teacher!"

The Buddha replied, "Sir, it's like this. All human beings have eighty-three problems. It's a fact of life. Sure, a few problems will go away now and then, but soon enough others will arise. So we'll always have eighty-three problems."

The farmer responded indignantly, "Then what's the good of all your teaching?"

The Buddha said, "My teaching can't help with the eighty-three problems, but it can help with the eighty-fourth problem."

"What's that?" asked the farmer.

"The eighty-fourth problem is that we don't want to have any problems."¹

When Paul admonishes the congregation in Philippi to "Rejoice in the Lord always, again, I will say: Rejoice!"², he isn't telling them to try to live their lives as though they have no problems. Instead, like the Buddha, he's advising them to live their lives with an attitude of joy even in the midst of hard times. Paul, like the Buddha, would say that we will always have 83 problems. It's how we cope with that 84th problem that make all the difference in life.

¹ Found online at <http://www.happy-buddha.co.uk/storiesandanecdotes.htm>.

² Philippians 4:4, NRSV

Paul goes on to give some advice about coping with that 84th problem. “Do not worry about anything,” he says, “but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”³ In bumper sticker lingo, “Let go and let God.”

Yeah, right.

How many of us are truly capable of letting God have all of our troubles, no strings attached? And how many of us are truly examples of joyful people all the time, even when we have burdens that weigh us down unmercifully?

Very few of us, I fear. Oh, we give our troubles to God, but I know I’m guilty of leaving a cord attached so I can pull whatever is playing on my mind or my heart back into my own sphere of supposed control whenever I want to. On those occasions that I do manage to cut the cord, things work out far better than I expect – yet I still want control, I still want to worry or work or try to force the issue. I hope that someday, I’ll get to that point when I can “let go and let God.” How about you? How tightly do you hold those strings?

Leave it to Paul to give us additional help in letting go. “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”⁴ I read this to mean that when we focus on true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent things that are worthy of praise, our minds will be too full to take back those things which we have turned over to God. And when our minds are full of things that are worthy of praise, it’s pretty easy to be joyful, isn’t it?

To close out this section of the letter to the Philippians, Paul gives them some advice about how to act, as well – advice that would suit us, too. “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,” Paul says, “and the God of peace will be with you.”⁵

So what is it that we’re to keep on doing?

According to John, we’re to do – ready for this? – true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent things that are worthy of praise. And John, a far more practical preacher than Paul is a writer, gets specific with his examples.

Got two of something when someone else doesn’t have even one? Give one away.

³ Philippians 4:6, NRSV

⁴ Philippians 4:8, NRSV

⁵ Philippians 4:9, NRSV

Doing business with someone? Be honest and fair in your dealings.

Responsible for someone's protection? Do a good job and don't spread rumors about them.

It's particularly important to note that John isn't speaking just to individuals as he teaches how to get ready for the one who is coming after him. He's speaking to the collective groups, as well. Joe, Jim, Janet, and Jane as well as all of the tax collectors and all of the soldiers.

John knows that it's much easier to fight corrupt systems when there's more than one "bucking the system". He also knows that it's easier to change collectively than individually; we see that played out today in AA and other 12 step programs in which participants have a sponsor who's been there ahead of them.⁶ And we use that same principle when we have mentors for our confirmation students, when student teachers enter the classroom for the first time, and when seminary students do their internships. A supportive mentor or sponsor – or a supportive group of people going through similar things – can make all the difference between failure and success.

The word that many translations use in John's teachings is "do" in verses 4-7, but it's the same word in Greek as the word translated as "bear". So the question, "What should we do?" might better be phrased, "What should we bear?"⁷

John's answer is the Good News. When we do the things that John commends to us, we are bearing the Good News into the world in a way that others can see, hear, and touch. How can we be anything but joyful when we bear Good News?

To rejoice always, as Paul advises, is to live in a state of joy. I would say to you that joy is the state of being in which we are rooted in Christ so well that everything we bear into the world is Good News.

Back during the fall, I tried to emphasize that stewardship is a way of life. John and Paul say so – John specifically in his teaching that we should learn to live with "enough" and share our bounty⁸, Paul in his teaching that God will handle the worrisome things with us if we are but good stewards of our prayers and turn our worries over to God with no strings attached. John and Paul are both keen on the idea that we are known by what we do, namely, to witness the to the Good News of the coming of the One who comes to set the world free from sin and sorrow with his rule of truth and grace.

⁶ Exegetical survey by Rev. Brian Stoffregen at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke3x7.htm>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

We have the opportunity before us to witness to the Good News here in our community. As you heard earlier, the Hair family lost everything in a fire recently – they are the ones in our community today who have no shirts, no coats, no home. We are living into the new way of being as John and Jesus call us to be when we give generously to make sure that we don't have two shirts when they have none, or two coats or two pairs of shoes or presents under our Christmas trees when they don't even have a single coat, never mind a Christmas tree.

Be joyful! Good News! Someone special is coming! Joy, joy, joy!