

THE SPIRITUAL NECESSITY OF HAVING FUN

Psalm 100

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I have known Dean a long time, and we've always joked around a lot. When I found out that he won the VIP raffle, I thought, "Oh, he's going to pick a hard sermon topic for me...he's going to play 'Stump the Preacher.'" But then he sent me his topic - actually what he sent me is what I'm using for the sermon title, "The Spiritual Necessity of Having Fun" - and I thought, "What a great topic - very original - and very fitting for Dean. He and Laurie seem to have a lot of fun - going to concerts, enjoying their garden, playing with their dogs."

Then I began to think about passages in the Bible that would fit. There are many references to "joy" in the Bible. The Psalms talk to us about the joy that is found in worship and music and dancing. Both the Old and New Testaments refer to times of communal celebrations, weddings and feasts and banquets. We don't see Jesus goofing off or telling jokes, but he liked a good pun - some of the parables include plays on words that don't translate well. More significantly, Jesus lived with a sense of what I'll call "lightness", for lack of a better word. He didn't take himself too seriously. No matter where he was going, he'd stop to notice the world and the people around him. He enjoyed leisurely meals and times with friends.

If I had to pick a character from the Bible who didn't seem to know how to have fun, it'd be Paul. Paul would not have been the most popular guy to invite to a party, but there's even a story in Acts about a night Paul spent in jail with a fellow Christian named Silas. The two of them sang hymns, eventually converting the jail keepers and the other

prisoners. It might not be classified as fun, but at least they were experiencing the transformative joy of music.

It's good to remember all of these references, because, let's face it, the Bible has a reputation of being anything but a book that can bring happiness. Many people lump together the Bible, worship, church and religion and think of it all as a guilt-inducing downer. The Ten Commandments don't help. They're some of the most well-known verses in the Bible, and they certainly have a negative undertone - "Thou Shalt Not" - you can almost hear Charlton Heston's booming scary voice. Christian faith is known, sometimes, as a religion that keeps people from having fun. "Oh, you're Christian? You're not allowed to swear, right? Or drink?" We're known as a place with restrictive rules.

Those are generalizations, of course; but I think they point to a uncomfortable truth. We who call ourselves followers of Jesus haven't done a great job of dispelling those myths. We could do better at talking about the joy we find in the life of faith and the joy we find as part of a congregation that knows how to have fun.

Let's take as our premise this morning the idea that God gives us life as a gift and that it is the fondest desire of God's heart for us to enjoy the gift of life. Just stop there and take that in. It's easy to say and the words are familiar, but do we really believe it? Do we really believe that God deeply, keenly wants for us to savor the gift of life? You know how it is when you give a gift to someone you love. Maybe it's something you made yourself. Or something you chose, carefully selected after weeks of thought. You watch your beloved's eyes as he opens the present, and you're anxious to see a spark of delight. And when someone truly loves and enjoys and uses a gift you've given her, it continues to thrill you with happiness. Did you ever think that's how God is? Here you are: alive on this incredible planet with so much beauty and opportunity...The one who

gives it to you wants you to unwrap each day as if it were something fragile and special...God wants to see us smile, God wants to hear us laugh and sing...

One of my favorite verses is from the gospel of John in which Jesus says, "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly." That word, "abundance" connotes so much more than surviving, or barely getting by. It points to a life that is thriving and joy-filled.

This premise doesn't lead to the conclusion that God wants us to live in a hedonistic way. In fact, at one point Jesus criticizes those who do nothing but "eat, drink and be merry." Enjoying one's life is not the same as selfishly disregarding the needs of others. A spiritually healthy life is a well-balanced life.

There are all kinds of interesting theories about how and why some American Christians feel so guilty about having fun. One historian blames both Calvinism and capitalism, both of them philosophies that emphasize the importance of work and productivity. We have also been heavily influenced by our Puritan ancestors. Tongue somewhat in cheek, here's one writer's description: "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

The Puritans had barely arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony when they banned gambling. And then they banned a lot of other things.

On March 22, 1631, the General Court issued the following ordinance: "It is ... ordered that all persons whatsoever that have cards, dice or tables in their houses, shall make away with them before the next court under pain of punishment."

More social control soon followed. Seven months after gaming was outlawed, the Massachusetts Puritans decided to ban fancy clothing, living with Indians, and smoking in public. Missing Sunday services would land you in the stocks. Celebrating Christmas

would cost you five shillings. The only holidays they celebrated were Election Day; Commencement Day, to celebrate college graduation; and Training Day, which involved military exercises.

You can imagine that people were just standing in line to be a part of that fun community!

Fortunately, we have shed the belief that the only way to be Christian is to be somber. But today, there's another obstacle. When we're aware of the immensity of the world's problems, and when we're aware that people within our own community are suffering, it seems somehow inappropriate to focus on having fun.

My first position in ministry was as an associate minister in a church in Waco, Texas. Like we do here, we had Wednesday night worship during the season of Lent, and one Wednesday night I was in charge. It happened to be April 1, and so I chose as my topic for that night's meditation the verse that says, "The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God, so be fools for Christ." I had prepared a short, light-hearted message about what that passage might mean. The service was in a very small chapel; only a few people attended. One church member came because he really needed prayer that night. He'd received a cancer diagnosis from his doctor that day, and he needed his church. I felt that what I'd prepared to say would seem ridiculously unhelpful. I don't now remember what I said or did. But it doesn't always feel right to focus on fun, does it?

It may seem counterintuitive, but what seems to be true is that the people who do the most good in the world are also the people who have the best life balance, people who understand that you can't be an activist 24/7 or a caregiver 24/7; you can't bury yourself in the news nonstop. You also have to take care of yourself, part of which means doing the things that cause your spirit to really soar.

Maybe it's music you make or music you listen to. Maybe it's planning a special trip. Maybe it's finding the time to pursue a hobby you can absolutely lose yourself in, fully engrossed in that moment. Maybe it's photographing birds and deer in the woods or maybe it's photographing your children or grandchildren. Following your favorite baseball team, taking an afternoon nap, working the crossword puzzle, reading a book, learning to cook a new recipe...how long has it been since you gave yourself permission to do the things that cause your spirit to soar?

I did a little research on having fun this week, and I discovered a new word: gelotology. It sounds like the study of jello, but it's actually the study of laughter and its effects on our bodies. Laughter can help improve mood, increase immune system functioning, and help us cope with stress. Gelotologists recommend that we intentionally look for ways to laugh more. Watch something on TV that causes you to belly-laugh. Spend time with a funny friend.

Can we really effectively change the world for the better if we're miserable ourselves? If we have forgotten how to embrace life as the wonderful gift it is, will we truly be motivated to make a difference?

People who have truly embraced life as a gift are people who feel deeply grateful for that gift. Joy and gratitude walk hand in hand. From that place of joy and gratitude we are then inspired to want to make life better for others. When we recognize the beauty of the world around us, we want to preserve the wonders of creation. When we wholeheartedly appreciate meals with family and friends, we want to make sure all people have the opportunity for food and shelter and home and family.

Some people distinguish between the words happiness and joy as a way of pointing out the difference between two experiences. Happiness can refer to that rather fleet-

ing state of being; something external has caused you to feel temporarily happy. Joy is a deeper internal experience; it's longer-lasting. Joy connects us to our values and commitments.

Shopping may make you happy, eating something you especially like may make you happy, watching a movie that causes you to laugh is a happy experience. But spending time with a person you've cultivated a good relationship with brings joy. Becoming skilled at a hobby or craft brings joy. Doing something that enhances someone else's life brings joy.

Our Puritan and Calvinist ancestors believed that we were to tell people about our faith to try to save them from the wrath of hell. It might have been a compelling message but it didn't do much to save Christianity from its reputation as being a harsh and severe way of life. What if we tell people about our faith because we want them to experience the joy that we find when we're together in community, working to make the world a better place?

God wants to see us enjoy the gift of life - and share that joy with others. So go do something fun this week!