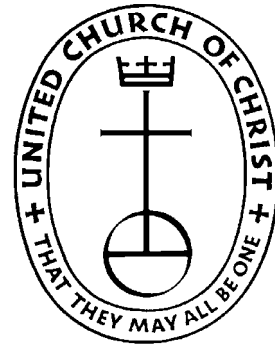


The Worth of Mirth

A Sermon By —

THE REV. DR. ED BLOOMFIELD

February 22, 2009



This sermon discusses joy, a gift from God that our fast-paced lives often lack. Our faith teaches us that you gain your life by losing it; that being a servant will make you happier than you ever have been; that finding someone or something to love passionately, produces the one true happiness that is God's joy, the joy was Jesus' and that he wants to be full and complete in your heart and mine.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,

Passionately Committed to Social Justice

241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

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Quinquagesima is the name for the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. It is also called Shrove Sunday or Esto Mihi. The name originates from the Latin word for fifty: quinquagesimus, referring to the fifty days of Lent before Easter Sunday. The earliest it can occur is February 1 and the latest is March 7. Like Mardi Gras which follows it, Quinquagesima Sunday affords an opportunity for celebration and uninhibited merriment prior to the somber days of Lent. Hence the boa, gaily colored paraments, the paper lanterns, and the Dixieland band. If you want to see some “moa of my boa,” meet me in the narthex after the service!

Today’s sermon is about God, joy, laughter, happiness and mirth. Mirth is gladness accompanied with laughter. The primary texts for this sermon are Proverbs 17:22 – “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drieth the bones” – and Ecclesiastes 3:4 – “There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.”

I want to begin by sharing one of my favorite church jokes and some of my favorite church bloopers. Then I want to talk seriously about the nature of happiness and joy.

Several years ago I heard about a minister who was once told by a church member, “Your sermon today was like the peace and mercy of God.” The minister thought that was a very nice compliment until the church member added, “Your sermon was like the peace of God in that it passed all understanding, and it was like God’s mercy in that I thought it would never end.” I certainly hope that today’s sermon will not be like that! Now for some of my favorite church bloopers.

1. The Rev. Dr. Greenwood spoke briefly, much to the delight of the congregation.
2. The low self-esteem support group will meet Thursday at 7 p.m. Please use the back door.
3. During the absence of our senior minister, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when J.R. Stubbs supplied our pulpit.
4. Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.
5. Don’t let worry kill you off – let the church help.
6. The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict.

7. At the evening service tonight the sermon topic will be "What Is Hell?" Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Laughter and humor are gifts from God, and God can speak to us through them. Proverbs 17:22 reminds us that a cheerful heart is good medicine. Modern science has also affirmed this in its discovery that laughter releases endorphins in the brain that can speed healing. A good belly laugh also does wonders for our heart, blood pressure, and breathing, causing a relaxed state that can last as long as 45 minutes. A really good joke can make us happy and fill us with joy. It can also improve our outlook and create a positive attitude that will carry us through many of life's vicissitudes. But not even a great joke which evokes uproarious laughter is enough to make us happy and fill us with joy abundant. And I think I know why.

Joy is the feeling of happiness that comes from a sense of well-being. Aristotle thought happiness is the felt awareness of self-actualization. According to the hedonistic paradox, happiness cannot be directly sought after, but is a by-product of who we are and the kind of life we live. The great German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that getting what we want doesn't make us happy. It only makes us want other things we do not have.

The most popular course at Harvard last year was Psychology 1504: Positive Psychology. Its subtitle was "How to Get Happy." 900 students enrolled to hear lectures by Professor Tal ben Sharar. The secret to the new course is its focus on academic psychology – namely, what makes people happy rather than studying different psychological pathologies. It is apparent that (1) the topic is important and relevant in the lives of some of America's brightest and potentially most successful people, and (2) happiness must be fairly illusive, absent mostly, if some of our brightest and best will pay \$40,000 per year to learn how to get some.

We all know that there is certainly plenty to be unhappy about in the world around us. I think that many of us are not generally very happy, not to mention profoundly joyful, because we have bought into the big lie – that satisfying our wants will make us happy. I think we're not very happy because we're looking in the wrong place. We have bought into the consumer-economy gospel that the more you have, the more you can buy and accumulate, the happier you will be. Many of us still live within an overwhelmingly seductive system that promises, over and over, that true happiness is available if only we can afford the right attire, jewelry, automobile, spa and vacation.

When the Harvard students were asked why they were unhappy, most of their answers had to do with time. It seems that there's never enough of it. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote that "never before have human beings had as much

free time, and yet never have they had as little time." He calls us *homo accelerandus* and says that fast food is the symbol of the fast life we lead. "Modern *homo accelerandus*," he writes, "eats fast food, has many encounters but few experiences, many contacts but no relationships – is always in a hurry." It is our sense of mortality, the limits of time, the fear of death, Moltmann says, that manifests itself in an accelerated pace of life, the "time distress" we experience and the absence of joy.

The Harvard happiness course offered six tips to help its students find happiness:

1. Give yourself permission to be human.
2. Happiness lies at the intersection of pleasure and meaning, so do things that are both pleasurable and meaningful.
3. Keep in mind that happiness depends on your state of mind, not the state of your bank account.
4. Simplify.
5. Exercise, eat right, and get enough sleep.
6. Express gratitude.

Good, helpful advice for harried, hassled, hurried, sleep-deprived people who are always late for the next appointment and eat standing up.

Sadly, the list omits the one thing necessary to find happiness: the wisdom of our faith, that you gain your life by losing it; that being a servant will make you happier than you ever have been; that finding someone or something to love passionately, something important enough to live and die for, will in fact produce the one true happiness that is God's joy, the joy that Jesus said was his too and that he wants to be full and complete in your heart and mine.

New England author Frederick Buechner writes, "We are above all things loved," and people who know that and believe it and trust it "should come together like people who have just won the Irish sweepstakes. It should have us throwing our arms around each other."

There are plenty of things to worry about and be afraid of. There is plenty of unhappiness enough. But Buechner reminds us, "at the heart of darkness there is joy unimaginable. Joy is home. God created us in joy and for joy. God's joy is in our blood."

Jesus said, "I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

My friends, the truth of the matter is that not one of us here today knows how much longer we have to live. But this much is certain: the more we laugh and the more we see the humorous side of life, the better off we will be and the greater the legacy we will leave to those whose lives we touch. The ability to laugh is one of the most important gifts God has given us. And that, I think, is the worth of mirth. Amen.