

Living with more joy

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne April 26, 2009



Intro to the service: It's a funny thing about people. Sometimes having someone near you can make you feel secure, at other times, not so much. Even when it's the same person. Take for instance when you're walking down a dark street and you hear some noises, or a scream a little ways off. There are footsteps behind you, and you start to walk a bit faster. Then, you'll be so very relieved to see a police car sitting on the other side of the street. Having the police nearby is a comfort ... until later in the week when you're hurrying to work and you're late and you look up and see there's a police car sitting there by the side of the road. Or what if you needed help with something at work? You might enjoy having a knowledgeable person standing nearby to answer questions. But if that same person stands too close and looks over your shoulder while you're working, you may feel like they're crowding you. You just don't want them to watch what you're doing too closely, even if they are very nice about it. That happened to me a week ago. Shad and I were getting everything ready for the Spirit Cafe. As we stood in the Foyer waiting to greet our guests we noticed the sun shining through the front doors, and man were there a lot of fingerprints. So we grabbed paper towels and windex and got to work. We tried our best but Shad and I need to stay in the kitchen because all we accomplished was trading in the fingerprints for streaks. As we walked outside to work on the doors we looked in to see a friendly face, Ken, watching us. And he was polite to be sure, and he didn't say a thing as he watched us, though we knew he had been a volunteer janitor at a church in Pennsylvania for many years ... And he could have said a number of things, you know about the quality of our work and how we might have improved ...

How do you feel about having God near you? That's something we're going to look at for the next few weeks. Today in particular, I'm going to ask you to think about whether having God near you is an unsettling prospect or a more comforting one, or maybe both depending on what you're up to. Now, that's important because if you are going to live more fully, more joyfully that is, it's going to take more than good fortune and a great deal of money. **Being fulfilled in life has little to do with what you have or hold or buy or accomplish ... and it has everything to do with the company you keep.** As we'll hear in throughout today's service, there can be a real comfort in knowing God is near, and that he has promised to be there for you ... always.

Reading from Isaiah 41 and 43

I have chosen you and will not throw you away. Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will

strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand ... I am holding you by your right hand—I, the Lord your God. And I say to you, 'Do not be afraid. I am here to help you ... When the poor and needy search for water and there is none, and their tongues are parched from thirst, then I, the Lord, will answer them. I, the God of Israel, will never forsake them. I will give them fountains of water in the valleys. In the deserts they will find pools of water ... yet when you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you ... because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you. (NLT)

Segue to song: God will never forsake you, never leave you. He promises to be not only at your right hand, but to walk through life holding your hand, guiding you, comforting you. And why? Because you are the one he honors with his love. If you will but have faith in him, you'll have so much less reason to fear, no matter what happens, or what you have to go through. Though you walk through valleys low, you'll fear no evil, when your heart trusts in God ...

Song: Have faith in God

*I'll walk closer now on the highway
Through the darkest night will you hold my hand
Jesus guide my way
O you mourn with me and you dance with me
For my heart of hearts is bound to you
Though I walk through valleys low I'll fear no evil
By the waters still my soul, my heart will trust in you
O you counsel me and you comfort me
When I cannot see you light my path
Though I walk through valleys low I'll fear no evil
By the waters still my soul, my heart will trust in you*

Song: You are in control

Intro to message: Being out of control is an unsettling experience for many of us. I won't ask for a show of hands on this one, but I'm betting a few of you in this room are afraid to fly. Even though statistically it is safer, or so they say, it is safer to fly than to drive to the airport, I understand the concern. In the car I get to be in control. In the airplane I have to depend on the pilots and the mechanics, and you know, no matter what else, you never have to worry about having a parachute

when you're sitting behind a steering wheel. Others of you may not like being out of control when you have an operation. That's a time when you are in someone else's hands. You have to depend on the skill and attention of the physician, as well as the nurses and anesthetist. I'm not real happy about sitting in the Dentist's chair. As a child I had a dentist who seemed to be all thumbs and was always in a hurry. Years later when I was living in a fancy suburb of New York I had a dentist who was part of the congregation. He had all sorts of fancy ways of doing things. The one I liked the best was his permission, at any time, to raise my hand and he'd stop and talk with me. I felt more in control ... at least until I got the bill. But there's something about being out of control of events or of life itself that makes even the most confident person feel uncomfortable. That makes it hard to sing the last song with real conviction. *"You are in control, God, you are in control."* I suppose at some level that sounds good, but then it's just another situation where you may feel things are out of control. And who likes that?

How do you face situations that are out of your control? You know that has become a much bigger question these days. Whether or not we were ever really in control of things before, it's at least clear we're not now. That's why we'll be spending the next few weeks talking about how to get rid of that growing sense of stress and fear that seems so common today. As a way of understanding the power of Easter, this message series is all about living a new way. When Jesus rose from the dead he gave us a hope for new life both here in this world and in the world to come. It's time we Christ Followers starting living it up, starting living into this new life-style. We've got everything to gain from learning how. For instance, the Bible encourages you to leave your past life of rules and regulations, of sin and shame behind. It's time to start living large. The bible says, *"This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike 'What's next?'"* [Romans 8:15 The Message] Yes, Jesus rose from the dead to challenge you to join him in the adventure of life, not in a life of worries and complaints. That's not why he died. That's not why he rose again ... just so you and I could muddle through life. He's done his part,. Now it's time for you and me to get serious about doing ours. The Bible challenges you: *"So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides."* [Colossians 3:1 The Message] **Seek Christ, and seek to live as he did. You'll be surprised at the benefits you will receive from making this change in your life my friends.**

Of course, no matter how you live, you'll encounter challenges. And sure, there are a lot of reasons to be worried these days. Terrorism and nuclear proliferation, North Korea and Iran, panepidemics of the swine flu and HIV. Read the papers and it's all there. They give me a diagnosis for sleepless nights. Then you can look at your paycheck, your bills, and if you had any, your 401K and investments. Is your job secure? Is your marriage secure? Is your pension? And what about you? What's

stopping any of us from melting down into a puddle of insecurity? There must be something that can be done.

(1) You could always say *"I'll think about that tomorrow."* Try the Sgt. Shultz philosophy and keep saying, *"I see nothing, I know nothing!"* That could work in the short term. Yet deep down, each of us knows it isn't true. It only takes the next big thing in life to pop up and pop that bubble to force you to face reality. Maybe it will be the diagnosis or the death of a friend. Maybe it'll be going through with the daily grind and feeling that there's got to be more. There's more to life than seeing nothing and knowing nothing.

(2) You could try to live with a greater sense of self-confidence. You know, that's where you look in the mirror in the morning and say to yourself, *"When the going gets tough, the tough get going."* Only what's the source of your confidence? Maybe it's in a positive attitude. Have you ever tried using some of those positive affirmations? Those are the popular pithy little sayings you're supposed to use to get yourself in the right attitude. Last week I tried one. According to one popular book I was told to: *"Stand in front of the mirror, preferably in underwear or unclothed. Start at one end of your body and work to the other end finding as many nice*

things to say about your body as you can. For example say: 'I love my ears. They hear well and enable me to listen. They have a beautiful shape. I love my wonderful ears.' Doing this techniques helps you find and appreciate more of you." I tried standing by the mirror, but the closer I looked I realized there's already more of me than I like, so that's that. I also came across some other affirmations that seemed more my speed ... maybe you'd find them helpful this week:

I assume full responsibility for my actions, except the ones that are someone else's fault.

I no longer need to punish, deceive or compromise myself. Unless, of course, I want to stay employed.

I need not suffer in silence while I can still moan, whimper and complain.

Today I will gladly share my experience and advice, by saying "I told you so."

Remember: a good scapegoat is as welcome as a solution to the problem.

I'm not against living with more confidence. I'm all for it in fact. It simply depends on what or in whom you have confidence. That's the real issue here. Because you can trust the wrong things, and the wrong people with your life. Or you can just hope that confidence is enough on its own. Like Maria in the Sound of Music you can ask yourself why you are afraid or worried about things ...and then simply decide to have confidence in everything ...

Seek Christ, and seek to live as he did. You'll be surprised at the benefits you will receive from making this change in your life my friends.

*With each step I am more certain,
Everything will turn out fine.
I have confidence the world can all be mine!
So you'll have to agree I have confidence in me.
I have confidence in sunshine, I have confidence in rain.
I have confidence that spring will come again!
All I trust becomes my own!
I have confidence in confidence alone.
Besides, which you see, I have confidence in me!*

Hmmm. As the old church lady used to say on Saturday Night Live, "Well isn't that special." Confidence in itself is as useful as having faith in faith itself. What good is that? OK let me be serious now for a few minutes. **If your confidence is in anything other than God all you're doing is trying to hold onto the wind. Without God, there's nothing there to really grab.** On the other hand, confidence in God gives you the strength to live with joy and hope no matter what. The Bible explains: "Those who trust in the Lord, and who have made the Lord their hope and confidence, are blessed." [Reading from Jeremiah 17:7 NLT] Read that with me, if you will ... to be blessed here means to have something that only comes from God, to tap into his power, to live in a new way, to be given something you can't grab or buy or make for yourself. That's something I want in my life. It is something, I truly want you to find in your lives too. That's my mission in life ...

Only how? What does it take to live with confidence in God? I believe it starts when you get honestly connected to God in a very real way. Not cut off, or going your own way. Not going about life without any care for God or his ways. No, to receive the blessings that come with living in confidence, you need to get connected to God in every day. Jesus once explained this kind of relationship which you and I can have with God:

Reading from John 15:1-11

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener ... Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing ... I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in his love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!" (NLT)

Notice that Jesus tells us the whole purpose of our connection with God is so we can tap into the blessings of God, so that we can be filled with joy so our joy overflow. Overflowing joy sounds like a good thing. In his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, pastor John Ortberg says this, "Joy is at the heart of God's plan for humans. The reason for this is worth pondering ... Joy is at the heart of God himself. We will never understand the significance of joy in human life until we understand its importance to God. I suspect that most of us seriously under-

estimate God's capacity for joy." Instead we see God as angry or disappointed or something else. But why? Isn't joy a heavenly thing? And if so, who else should be more joyful than the Lord of the Heavens?

Joy comes in connection with God. So let me ask you this: how are you going to trust God more on Monday and then on Tuesday and all the way through Friday night and Saturday morning? How can you receive the blessing of joy God offers? Friends, I want to help you find that life-style. but let's be fair, it's going to take me more than the few minutes I have left this morning. That's why we'll be talking about this through the next few weeks. Still let me leave you with this: confidence comes from two Latin words: *con* which means with and *fidea* which means faith. **Confidence means living with faith, and not just any faith, but a faith in God's presence in your life and his promise of eternal life.** Those are the things that change your life and give you hope for tomorrow and the strength and courage you need for the challenges of today. As the Bible tells us, "Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." [Romans 12:1 The Message] Here are some basic steps you can embrace what God is doing this week so you can unplug from fear and tap into the power of God's joy.

(1) Avoid complainers (and avoid becoming one)

You now the kinds of people I'm talking about: joy vampires. They can suck the life out of anyone. People like this who complain all the time are also contagious, so if you are around someone who complains you may find it very hard to find any joy. It's OK to give yourself some good boundaries, to limit the time you spend with negative people, at least to limit the effect they have on you. Listen to yourself this week too, to make sure you've not been bitten and turned into one yourself. As Mother Theresa said, "Never let anything so fill you with sorrow to make you forget the joy of the risen Lord." And don't let others suck it out of you either.

(2) Cultivate the ability to say "Thanks" (and mean it)

One of the surest signs of joy is gratitude. They go together. That's because joy is something God gives you; it's not the same as happiness, which in this country we know all too well, is something you have to pursue. Because joy is a gift, it's important to say "Thanks" to God for the blessings you receive. Start by being thankful for the small things in life like the food on your table, or the help of a stranger, or the beauty of the day, or the love of another. Then practice being thankful by saying "Thanks" to people all day long. The more you practice it, the more you will begin to mean it. There's nothing that changes a challenge into a blessing faster than gratitude.

(3) Stay focused on God throughout the week

If you want to live it up, you have to make joy a priority in your life. The second law of thermodynamics states, (anyone, anyone?) that things will lose energy, fall apart, and return to their lowest state over time. In other words, having a spiritual life doesn't just happen. Being filled with joy is not an accident. Find ways to build time for God into each day (perhaps by listening to praise music in your car or by making time for reading and prayer, or whatever). Then you will be open to receiving more of God's blessings.

(4) Get better connected to God and do life with him

Jesus reminds you if you are cut off from God you can not bear any fruit. Translation: to live with hope and confidence you have to be connected to Jesus. Stop trying to do life on your own. You have to be willing to let Jesus have the wheel, and be in control. Why is that such a hard thing? We'd all be in a big mess if I tried to fly the plane or operate on a patient or even check your teeth. Even if being out of control in those situations is uncomfortable, I go along, because I know the right person is in charge. And that's exactly how I find confidence in each day. I am willing to trust that God's control over my life is way better than my trying to take over and control everything.

Bottom line: having confidence in yourself or having confidence in confidence alone will lead to disappointment. When it comes to overcoming my fears and living with more joy, I need outside help. I need an expert, I need the right person. What I need to get rid of my fears is the power of God. Confidence itself won't help me through my challenges. But God can. In God I find the one who has the power to handle whatever comes up in each day. I don't have to worry that I'll face things too hard for me. I already know I will, but they won't be too hard for God and me. All because of what God did on Easter I now know God has come near, and has promised to be with me always, whether I walk through the fire or I find myself up to my neck in the flood. I can live large after hearing his promise to me: "*Fear not, I am with you.*" God's presence is the security on which I can depend, and the reason for trading up from fear to joy.

Song: Hero of my heart

*Into your arms I fall, secure and safe from harm
No better place I know to find protection from the storm
When I feel like I'm too weak to make it on my own
You're always there to find me and bring me safely home
You are the hero of my heart for you have rescued every part
You are the champion of my soul for you alone have made me whole
You're the one I call upon when I feel I can't go on
Now forever you will be, you're the only one for me
Now forever you will be the hero of my heart*