

Jubilation!

12/24/06 10:00AM

Rev. Peter Foss

*Dedicated to Sandy Burr for all the Joy she brings
to church every Sunday*

Remember in the film *Mary Poppins*, how Uncle Albert, who was played by Ed Wynn, laughed so hard he floated to the ceiling. He was soon followed by Dick Van Dyke, the chimney sweep, and then the two children, Jane and Michael. *Mary Poppins* looks chagrined as they all balloon above her, singing "I Love to Laugh." There was a good message in that sequence. Laughter is healthy for you; good medicine if you will.

A week ago we received a Christmas Card from Marie. Marie was a former Church Secretary. How she lasted I am not certain as many in the church were terrified of her and so avoided her. One woman refused to make copies in the church office when Marie was there! But Marie and I, although we had our disagreements, formed a truce over the years. On my sabbatical, I even acted as her stand-in son and took her out for a mother's day lunch. To many, it was no mystery why her three children lived in Florida and California. The thing that shocked me about getting this card signed Marie, in her black ink and familiar handwriting, was that she had died some two years ago. My first thought was that I was being haunted. Even when Linda reassured me that the card was from one of her school friends from Vermont, I took one last look at the uncannily similar handwriting. Finally, I broke into laughter at the whole scenario and what had gone through my mind. Sometimes you have to laugh.

Heck, every morning I laugh when I go into our garage. There by the car sits the only snow blower I have ever owned in my life. Bought it at the church yard sale this summer. Faithfully, I have started it up each month to keep it ready for the big storm! In this case, you are getting the last laugh!

I once told a Diaconate that if I seemed to put too much humor in my sermons or seemed to act too frivolously around church to please let me know. If they had I might have changed my ways, but they said they liked it. Kept them awake during church. Gave them new jokes to tell at work the next week. "But I don't want to be perceived as dishing out Religion Lite," I said. The response was that humor was preferable to fire and brimstone. They wanted to leave church feeling better. Liter maybe, but they wanted a minister who was of good cheer.

That's part of why I love this time of year, speaking as it does of joy. Just the word itself! "Joy to the World" "Joyful and triumphant" "Good Christian Friends rejoice" Joy is a seasonal theme and, for me, it takes the happy smile that we sometimes wear around and fills it with a far deeper meaning. It dissects our good cheer expressions so that we recall where that happiness comes from.

When I talk of this sense of joy, I like to use the word jubilation. It's not a word that we tend to use. We much prefer joy. We urge people to go, partake and enjoy. However, jubilation is a big word. In my mind, because inner joy is a big thing! It is joy that far exceeds laughter; it is the delight of knowing inwardly the love of God.

A few of you may have read the *Cotton Patch Gospel* by Clarence Jordan. It is a retelling of Luke's gospel with a Southern accent. Living in Georgia himself, based at a place called Koinonia Farm in a town named Americus, Jordan rewrote the gospel so as to be understood by the local, very rural population, many the descendents of poor slaves who picked cotton and peanuts. His book later became a one man show, Tom Key narrating the story along with a four man country band backing him up with hokey songs and ballads written by one of my favorites, Harry Chapin. I have always appreciated the book and even more its adaptation as a musical.

There is this one scene that I always recall. Jesus sets out for Jerusalem on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday. Of course, Jerusalem is known here as Peach Orchard Hill and, in the play, he rides a broken down Volkswagen convertible. With great excitement, the crowd of onlookers along the highway was waving, throwing their clothing and shouting, "Hail to the Chief" and "To the Lord's man." To everyone's surprise, however, the first thing Jesus does upon arriving is head right across the street into First Church. There he is met by unscrupulous merchandising. He chases out the money-raisers, complaining loudly that his house of prayer has been turned into a bankers' club, run by a bunch of religious racketeers as he calls them. It's the familiar story, but replaced with a different jargon.

When the church and its courtyard is free from such wayward activity, other people begin to come forward – the blind, the broken, and the young. Jesus waves to the reluctant, "Ya'll come. Come here." "Come to me. You who have had a bellyful of emptiness. Come and share my harness." Jesus once again serves as an example of how to live our lives – by caring for the needy in our midst. Explaining what he has to offer, Jesus announces...that his assignment, very simply, is (one word) joy.

The small cast then comes together for a song. You can guess the title – "Jubilation." When I first heard this song, I was just touched by how appropriate it was. When we truly worship God, as Jesus did in his life, our ministry is not the maintaining of an institution...it is a daily witness to those people who stand in the greatest need of God's comforting touch. When such ministry takes place, our hearts are filled, truthfully, with such joy and intense satisfaction. We treasure those feelings of inner contentment! We feel our worth as brothers and sisters to all God's creation. For it is at that moment that the love of God and the love of neighbor as oneself merge together as if a fine woven fabric. Jubilation!

The nativity story is the genesis of this joy. It exists before us still as a dream of sorts. The promise of everyone coming together as one. Shepherds and Wisemen – representing the rich and the poor. Angels of heaven alongside the people who live off the land. In the midst of Herod's chaotic world, God brings order for all who observe and understand. Quite incredible, isn't it? That through the grace of a child, to an unwed mother and a father who certainly had second thoughts, God's love is born into the human heart! Reason in and of itself, I suppose, to laugh hysterically! And perhaps we do, before tearing up...our joy acknowledging the God who has the power to create a miracle before our eyes. This is the God who comes for us – to save! Surely this is the story that brings us here, because it opens our hearts to the possibility of love, gentle love, changing the way we live and the world we live in.

This is the Good News of great joy! That Jesus Christ is born among us. His birth is a gift that touches us whenever we refuse to be co-opted by a church that merchandises God's name. When we claim Christ's ministry to the poor as our own; when we rely on his favor to bless the lepers, the scorned and the lost. What Jubilation we then feel inside! This same dream is reality as we deny the authority of a church that accepts society's norms as its own, insisting rather on unconditional love for all people. What more can we ask than to feel the thrill of serving God. To minister. To be the church united, partners in covenant with God. It is our chosen calling. It indeed is the jubilation that exceeds all expectation. "Christ the Lord is born unto us today" Joy to the world. Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee. His birth...his love...God's gracious favor...it becomes our reason for being who we are. Jubilation, today and always.