

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
My Final Sunday Sermon as Pastor of the Church, June 10, 2012
Lessons: Numbers 6:22-27 and Matthew 7:7-12

ENTIRELY TOO MUCH FUN

One Sunday morning in the late 1950's or early '60's, two women were talking together as they left the sanctuary at the conclusion of the service. It was an 1,100 member church in Central Jersey, and in those days of high worship attendance, there was a considerable wait in line to shake hands with the minister. The two women were enjoying their conversation and started laughing. Suddenly, a church elder, looking annoyed, put his index finger to his lips and shushed them. It seems that in those days the sanctuary was a place of continual solemnity, and even worship concluded required a somber countenance and hushed tones. Laughter was inappropriate. One of those women was my mother, and later at home, I heard her opinion of the church's stuffy elders. I suspect dinnertime that day was when I learned that King David danced before the LORD God and that the Psalms call for "joyful noise" in worship.

Toward the end of my final adult forum, one of this church's elders who had been in the Fithian Room on the other side of the glass helping to count the offering, came into the forum and said, with a laugh in her voice and a sparkle in her eye, "You people are having entirely too much fun." We had been laughing throughout our conversation, even though the topic was serious. Later, I thought of the many times we have laughed, not only at church social events, but during board or committee meetings, congregational meetings, and, yes, worship services. We have laughed together a lot. When Gae saw the title of my sermon, she said that choir members often chide each other with that same facetious remark about having too much fun. I am adopting that pretend rebuke as my comment on the past twenty-six years and nine months I have been your pastor. We have had entirely too much fun for a proper Presbyterian church where tradition dictates that everything be done "decently and in order."

It has not, of course, all been fun. Wednesday afternoon I stood with some of her family and prayed at the bedside of a dying friend who had given me much encouragement and some counsel in the early years of my ministry here. There have been times of anxiety and frustration. Not everything I have tried has succeeded. I have known moments of disappointment including disappointment with myself. Only unwarranted pride could expect to do everything well, but people who care have regrets, and if we will, we can learn from them. God does not demand perfection but does, I believe, expect us to care enough to keep

learning and growing. God also gives us the grace we need to forgive ourselves as well as each other. The only type of perfection to which Jesus calls us is that of love, which still makes mistakes and has its moments to regret later, but, as he says, like our “Father in heaven,” refuses to write people off, do harm in response to harm done to us, or exclude even enemies from empathy and compassion.

While I was pondering (and that’s the right word) this service, which was difficult for me to put together, I saw in a devotional magazine the title for a reflection, “Say, ‘Thank You!’” That’s what I am doing right now. I want this sermon to say, “Thank you,” to God for you, the people of this congregation of Christ’s church, and for my nearly twenty-seven years of having entirely too much fun here, and to say, “Thank you,” to you for being you and being a church of people I could live and work with for so many years and still feel very sad about leaving, even though I am deeply grateful to God for the retirement situation of life into which Debbie and I are moving.

For what the Bible might call a “week of years,” meaning the past seven years or so, we have been engaged in the process of visioning. I have learned that visioning is not a program that can be spelled out and followed by the manual; it is an attitude, an awareness, a spirit of openness to life and the future of God’s making. For me, the call to visioning comes clearly from Jesus in our New Testament lesson. Seek and keep on seeking, and you will find better than you are looking for. Knock and persist in knocking – if necessary until your knuckles are raw – and the door will be opened for you. Not just any door, as though fate were in charge of our lives, but the right door for you will open. Ask, with all the faith and honesty of a child secure in her parents’ love – and maybe with some of her audacity as well – and what you need, not necessarily what you expect or think you want, will be given to you, and in the long run it will be better than what you wanted.

Why do we have to persist so much? Jesus says God knows what we need before we even ask; so, what’s the holdup? Protestant Christianity has so emphasized the truth that we cannot earn or accomplish our salvation in any way, by any means or effort, that Christians have been tempted to think we don’t need to do anything to seek change beyond saying faith’s words and, maybe, experiencing faith’s feelings of remorse, release, and joy. That’s why Christians sometimes speak of their salvation as though it were an event in their past, all settled and done. No, we cannot accomplish our salvation, but we must participate in it, and salvation is an ongoing process that continues as long as we live. I cannot drop off my soul at the repair shop and go about my business while Jesus fixes it for me and has it all polished and ready when I return to pick it up. My soul is my very self – spirit, mind, and body – and so I cannot leave it and go off. We need to keep seeking, knocking, and asking because we need to. We’re not trying to move a reluctant God; we’re trying to cooperate in God’s moving us. Yes, God knows what I need before I even ask, but I don’t, and often I

resist what I truly need, and so my learning and accepting thankfully what God shows me I need is a necessary part of the process of salvation. So is learning and accepting thankfully what other people need from me.

I think that people in churches either share laughter or build up resentments and grow apart. I suspect the alternative to having entirely too much fun as a church is having entirely too much conflict or, worse, indifference. That's why I included the final verse of our reading from Matthew – the “golden rule” as people call it – where Jesus urges us to think before we “do unto others” how we would feel if we were on the receiving end. Thank you for all the laughter and fun. Thank you also for the times of fear and heartache shared, lessons learned, viewpoints widened, and hope discovered. We have sought, knocked, and asked together, and thanks be to God for the doors that have opened, for the lessons learned, and for the friendship and love we have found. I look over my records and notes, and there I see the names of people in whose lives I have participated and who have now moved on beyond my reach except in our resurrection hope. I look at the young adults and recall their baptisms, confirmation classes, sleep-overs in Bonham Hall, youth group discussions, and more. I look at the children, and it seems that the older I get the more I enjoy them. I see the people who have stepped up to take responsibility and leadership over the months since I announced my retirement plan. I talk with people who welcomed us when we came, encouraged us through the years, and now wish us well as we depart. But running through all my thoughts and memories of this congregation is the laughter we have shared. Thank you for the laughter, your friendship which I hope to keep beyond the conclusion of the pastoral relationship, and all the life we have experienced together.

Our Old Testament lesson from Numbers is the benediction by which Israel's priests were to put the LORD God's name upon the covenant people. I am not a priest, and Jesus Christ is the one who has put God's name upon us, but this benediction is a favorite of mine, and I will conclude our service with it. Let me elaborate its blessings briefly. “The LORD bless you” means may God treat you with grace, steadfast love, kindness, and mercy. “And keep (or guard) you,” calls for God's protection and care as you live and serve. “The LORD smile on you” or, literally, “make his face shine on you,” speaks to me of God's presence, favor, and delight in you; more than good luck or fortune, it is the relational delight Jesus expresses as, “so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.” “The LORD lift up his face to you,” is a Hebrew expression indicating God's caring for you personally, recognizing you as God's very own, and showing love's partiality toward you. In Israel, judges were forbidden to “lift up face” to the accused or the accuser and show favoritism, but the blessing calls for God to favor you as parents do their own child toward whom they can never be impartial. “And give you peace.” The word is *shalom* which means wholeness, harmony, health, vigor, prosperity, and well-being in every sense. The benediction speaks my prayer for you, which I offer to God with gratitude for all we have shared. Amen.