

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, Christmas Music Sunday, December 11, 2011
Lessons: Psalm 126 and Luke 15:1-7

WHEN HEAVEN LAUGHS

Have you ever experienced having your eyes suddenly opened to something you realized you had known all along but had never been quite able to bring together in your mind to put into clear thoughts or words? I'm sure you have. It's the experience of, "Yes! That's it! That's what I've known and felt but have not been able to express until now."

Silvan S. Tomkins was a genius who developed humanity's first unified theory of human emotion. Sigmund Freud did not, but Tomkins did, and though already deceased by the time I first heard his name, he reached me through his interpreter and "senior student" (as he calls himself), Dr. Donald L. Nathanson, who gave me, through an advertisement for his video for clergy, the first of many "Aha! moments" I've experienced through exposure to what is now called Affect Script Psychology. The appeal of this new thing in my life is that it is not really new or, at least, not strange. It doesn't feel weird or contrived but helps me make sense of my own experiences and observations in living. It is also restrained, which for me is important. Popular claims to the latest new, secret truth that miraculously solves everything leave me cold and pretty sure somebody is trying to take money from me. If someone were to come and tell me that what I have thought, felt, and experienced all my life had no validity because he or she had some secret wisdom that overrides and overrules everything else, I would turn away because the person would make no connection with me and my life. There would be nothing we shared, and I would find the secret truth utterly alien to me.

This experience of recognition – of realizing what we have long known but not truly understood, of being met with an understanding of ourselves deeper and more hopeful than we have been able to achieve on our own – fits the biblical story of God's coming to us. The Bible shows us that from the outset God has met people where they were in life with what they needed but may never have realized they needed or might find. God has always made the connection with human beings in their actual flesh-and-blood existence – where they are, not where they should be but are not. If God would meet me only where I should be in my self and my life, that would be judgment which I would fail. But God enters into my life where I am, not with scorn or disgust, but with respect, forgiveness, and hope. God has always made the connection. Jesus is the full embodiment of that connection God makes with us in our own humanity. Don Nathanson understands this mystery. One day, he said

to me in psychological lingo, “So, Dick, you’re saying that you see Christ as the empathic link between God and you.” Now, “empathic link” is not a term we toss around in conversation every day, but, yes, it is in Jesus Christ that God has entered and now lives in our humanity – feeling what we feel as we feel it ourselves, knowing our needs from the inside and not as a stranger or superior observer – and it is in Jesus Christ that we are drawn into what we call God’s “divinity,” but the nature of which, we discover to our great relief, is redemptive love.

Expecting judgment but then receiving understanding, respect, and friendship is a most remarkable experience of joy. The joy affect is what happens in our bodies when either the good we wanted and hoped for is realized or the bad we feared is removed. It’s satisfaction or relief. Either way, the natural physical feeling is expressed as we smile, and if the feeling is more intense or explosive, we laugh. You know those feelings. We all do. Psalm 126 expresses them beautifully as suddenly, beyond all seeming possibility, God brings the Jews exiled in Babylon back home. It’s like having a soldier thought killed in combat suddenly show up at his family’s front door or having a prisoner wrongly convicted suddenly exonerated by a DNA test and released.

The joy affect is what we experience when our hopes are realized. When we experience this wonderful affect in relatively small matters of interest, we call it enjoyment. I’m doing something in which I’ve taken an interest, and it works out. Look, I was able to complete it to my satisfaction. So I smile, as the intensity of my working on the project relaxes into my satisfaction at the outcome. That’s enjoyment, which, of course, I can experience along the way as this piece falls into place or that step is achieved. When the intensity of my interest reaches levels we call excitement or, negatively, high levels of fear or distress, and then the outcome is good – just what I hoped for or, maybe, was too scared or discouraged to expect – then enjoyment comes as full blown joy, and I may find myself laughing. Nothing is funny. No, this is the laughter of joy.

So, when does heaven laugh with joy? Please understand that Jesus uses the word for “heaven” in the way of Jewish reverence which avoids presuming to speak God’s name directly. “Heaven” in this sense means God, not the sky which is the word’s literal meaning. Maintaining that reverence, Jesus speaks of joy among the heavenly council – an ancient image that faded as Israel became increasingly monotheistic but never quite disappeared. We say “angels,” which means messengers.

Jesus’ answer to the question of when heaven laughs with joy is right in keeping with the joy affect itself. God smiles upon the faithful who make faithful choices as they live their lives and who ask forgiveness when they mess up. But when the hopelessly lost is suddenly found and brought home, the joy affect explodes into the laughter Psalm 126 describes in the

experience of the exiles' return. "At first it seemed like a dream. Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy."

God's mouth fills with laughter when the lost one is found, when the prisoner is released, when the addicted person gains freedom to keep recovering for rest of his or her life and live free. God experiences joy when hatred is overcome by respect and community is restored; when the poor are enabled to stand up and achieve dignity; when the broken person is healed; when depressed person emerges from the fog out into hope and vitality; when the sentence of doom is reversed; when the hardened heart softens and the proud pious realize and accept their own humanity. Then heaven laughs with joy.

It is a misunderstanding to read Jesus' parable as saying God scorns the faithful, and so if we want God's love, we'd better sin a lot and make a grand mess of our lives. Understanding the joy affect has helped me make the connection Jesus makes between God's joy and our own human joy when the loved one we thought lost beyond recall is brought home. The message is not that of a skewed, unfair judgment based upon what is deserved and what is undeserved. The message is that we are all loved ones to God, and our calling as Christ's church is to help God's loved ones find their way back home to God's door, where they think they won't be welcome but are in for the surprise of their lives. Amen.