

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: Joy Comes in the Morning
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
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Isaiah 12, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

What are the most common words in the Bible? Ok, so take out the a, the an, the the ... focus on the words used by the Bible to tell us how to behave or how our faith might make us feel or what the Bible says about how we are supposed to be with one another.

If you guessed love, you are right ... 842 times the word love or loved or loving shows up. What comes in second place? Joy ... some version of joy, enjoy, joyful, rejoice ... shows up 694 times.

Don't quote me as an expert who is being exact on those numbers ... that was what a quick look-up showed. The point is that the word "joy" shows up a lot in the Bible, maybe second only to "love."

I chose the words of the thirtieth Psalm for our Call to Worship this morning because it lifts up the joy that comes to relieve us in our distress. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."

I have had a good many of those tear-filled nights. However, I have also been blessed by joy that dries those tears.

For most of my life I have been in church, but it wasn't until Jesus spoke the word "joy" to me in deep and prayerful meditation in the summer of 1976 that I truly became a Christian. That word filled my heart, gave me purpose and pointed me towards serving our Savior and our neighbors. It has completely changed my life.

That service included teaching in the church and serving in virtually all the positions that a layperson can do in the Protestant church ... Christian education, nursery school, mission work, evangelism, church finance, and more.

It did not occur to me that God would ever call me to be an ordained minister. Not ever in the near quarter of a century that followed my conversion ... until, until.

My wife and I were members of a UCC church, Rock Spring Congregational Church, in Arlington, VA. The church decided to begin the process of considering whether or not to become an open and affirming church, ONA in UCC parlance.

I had grave misgivings ... not about welcoming our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters into the congregation ... the church should welcome everyone. Rather it was my reading of scripture that led me to be skeptical about the idea of ordaining gays and lesbians as ministers.

Alan Baughcum

I made the mistake of sharing my reservations with the minister of the church. He of course then appointed me to the committee leading the church through the ONA process.

I will never forget the first meeting of that committee. I had been a debater in high school and college and loved nothing better than the back and forth of principled disagreement and argument. So, I showed up loaded for bear ... lots of arguments for my side and lots of references to support them.

One of the committee members was Charlotte Hufford-Anderson. She was a character, had a large personality and was a terrific person. She was about the age I am now and had a great smile! She loved riding her motorcycle and welding BIG metal sculptures, one of which occupied the wall behind the choir loft of the church, both behind the pulpit and the reader's lectern.

Charlotte spoke softly in that committee meeting. She described how her gay son had grown up in our church and in the local schools. Everywhere, including church and school, he faced putdowns and rejection. His growing-up had been very painful and the pain was reflected in what Charlotte said

I was very moved by Charlotte's words. I was moved to want to say a word of love, a word of peace to her. Surprise, surprise!! I did not want to debate her ... I wanted to comfort her and minister to her. And then an additional surprise. I was aware of wanting to be empowered to say a word of love and peace to her as an authorized minister of the church. We are all ministers of course by virtue of our baptism but I wanted to speak a loving word with the witness of the church supporting me. I wanted to speak to her on behalf of the church.

Well, I filed those thoughts away as the committee continued with its deliberations for the next year or two. I continued to be bothered by the notion that if the church became an ONA church, it could ordain openly gay and lesbian ministers.

One Saturday afternoon I was reading and studying to prepare for the next committee meeting, sitting on the patio behind our home in Virginia. As I put down the books and notes and sat quietly, Jesus spoke to me again, "If I choose someone to be my minister, who are you to judge?"

I did not care much for that message! Especially since it was a double message. At one level it was directed to my resistance to ordaining gays and lesbians. At another it was directed to me and to my treating lightly my increasing awareness that Jesus might be calling me to ordained ministry.

Those words turned me around ... not immediately but eventually. I voted for the ONA resolution that was adopted by our church. (And I later led another congregation in Maine to

Alan Baughcum

become an ONA church.) I also met with the pastor about this double message He urged me to take a course at Wesley Theological Seminary in nearby Washington, DC to test out the idea.

I visited the Wesley campus and was overwhelmed immediately with the certainty that the seminary offered me the training that I needed and that I longed for, in order to become ordained. I spent the next five and one-half years working full-time and going to seminary part-time. I was ordained by the Potomac Association of the Central Atlantic Conference on November 20, 2005.

We are four days short of the twenty-year anniversary of that ordination. What a blessing those twenty years have been! For me and, I hope, for the churches in which I have preached and pastored ... in Massachusetts, Maine, and now in Ohio. I am grateful for those parishioners who have enjoyed my ministry and for those who have endured my ministry. Both have taught me a lot about faith and the ministry and Christian service.

Now it is reasonable to think that I am being a little bit forward in suggesting to the folks at St. Michael's UCC that we mark this occasion with worship and a celebration. And you are probably right.

But I did it for two reasons. First, towards the end of my ministry in Maine, I noticed that increasingly families were not having funerals or memorial services or ANYTHING! to mark the passing of a loved one. I have discovered in my career as a pastor that the death of a loved one was a major opportunity for a pastor to minister to families and friends, to repair frayed or broken relationships, to renew dormant relationships and to remember and celebrate the joys of life with the deceased.

We need to mark important occasions in our lives, not just deaths, but important events and anniversaries! They are not just dates on a calendar, but an opportunity to give thanks to God for the blessings of our lives, to cry together to share the pains along our faith journeys, and to strengthen us for the future.

But the second reason for marking this occasion is to give thanks and praise to the God who called me. In the words of Isaiah, "And you will say on that day: "Give thanks to the LORD; call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Think about it for a moment. It is God who created this glorious universe and who created us. It is God who called us to be stewards of his creation! It is God who, in his very first commandment, Genesis 1:28, instructed us, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

How can we possibly hear those words and have any reaction other than joy?! God has given us life. God has given us purpose. God has given us human helpmates to accomplish that purpose.

Alan Baughcum

God offers himself as our helpmate in our work. In the words of the hymn that will follow this sermon,

“The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever-springing!
All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?”