

February 27, 1972
John 16:22-33 (N.E.)
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LET'S GET ENTHUSIASTIC

"A tempestuous enthusiasm, an overwhelming intensity of feeling, a keen awareness of the presence of God, an incomparable sense of power, and an irresistible control over the will and inner spirit. . ."

Does that sound to you like a description of the typical 20th century Christian churches with which you happen to be acquainted? Does it sound like a description of the church to which you belong? As a matter of fact,¹ it is one historian's description of the first century Christians.

To be sure there have been Christian groups throughout history who have possessed that same dynamic spirit--there still are--but for the most part the Christian church over the centuries has slowly tended to lose that enthusiasm and that ardor until in many places and at many times the church has been a mere form going through certain motions that have lost much of their original meaning and vitality.

Recently a man returned to this church after an absence of a dozen years or so. He is a keen observer of church life and conduct, and I was interested in hearing what it was he had to say about this congregation after his prolonged absence. This is, in effect, what he said: "When I left this church twelve years ago I thought it was more like a private club than any church I had ever been in. I am pleased to see how much more friendly and warm it is today."

Needless to say I was gratified by his observation. But I find it difficult to understand sometimes why every church is not the most exciting place in town, and every Christian the happiest, most excited and enthusiastic person alive. Just think what it is we Christians have--or are supposed to have--the conviction and assurance that this life of ours in this world of ours has meaning, that that meaning comes from God Himself who created the universe, and that the life that God gave us is eternal. If a man really believes that, what joy, what peace, what strength, what hope and assurance should be his! He ought indeed to be the happiest and most enthusiastic of creatures.

The story is told of a man in England about to be hung who was having a last conversation with the chaplain. The chaplain read him some of the words of Jesus, and the criminal said to the chaplain, "Do you believe that? Do you really believe that? If I believed that, I would be willing to crawl on my hands and knees over broken glass all across England to tell men and women it was true."

Now, I realize of course that not all persons sitting in church pews on Sunday mornings are Christians. Not all of them believe these wonderful assurances I have just described. Many are in church not because they have discovered, but because they are searching. Thank God for those who search. But woe unto us as Christians who are supposed to have found, if such persons sit in our midst each Sunday and worship with us every week only to go away empty, wondering why it is that these Christians believe what they say they believe, but don't seem to be a bit more happy and radiant about the whole thing than an agnostic or an atheist.

One is sometimes convinced that it is the church itself; its forms, creeds, traditions, that have robbed Christianity of its power and Christians of their enthusiasm. Many times I have heard men and women say to me, following a sermon that they particularly agreed with, "I felt like cheering and shouting." Well, why didn't they? Because, no doubt, they had been persuaded that that is not proper decorum in staid and sedate and polite church circles. Our excitement and our enthusiasm is today limited to the sports arena and the football stadium.

II

Well, my thesis this morning is that that quiet, respectable attitude toward our religious faith could well be the death knell of vital and significant Christianity.

I recall again a story I may have shared with you before concerning the woman who one Sunday stood up during the middle of the sermon and shouted "Hallelujah!" When the minister had regained his cool, he said to the woman, "Madam, we don't do that here." "I can't help it," she replied, "I've got religion." "Well," said the minister, "You didn't get it here."

Within the humor of that anecdote lies a great tragedy--that too many people in today's society, if they ever do get religion, don't get it in church. And the basic reason may well be that within the fellowship of too many churches there is so little enthusiasm for the message of Jesus Christ--a message which should inspire and excite the mind and spirit of every open-minded man and woman.

You and I if we claim to be dedicated Christians, are salesmen for our particular religious convictions. Did you ever know a successful salesman who was indifferent and apathetic and showed no enthusiasm for his product? The very possibility is ridiculous, but it nevertheless may be the primary reason why Christianity is so ineffective and so much taken for granted in our society--why it seems to have become powerless and ineffective to improve and transform men and women who in turn can transform society.

III

Listen again to that description of the early church: "A tempestuous enthusiasm, an overwhelming intensity of feeling, a keen awareness of the presence of God, an incomparable sense of power, and an irresistible control over the will and inner spirit. . ."

How much would every minister love to serve a congregation like that. And yet every minister must face the fact that a great share of the responsibility for developing a church like that lies squarely on his own shoulders. But no minister can do it alone, and many people today are all too eager to transfer that responsibility to him exclusively.

If you have had a real taste and a real understanding of what Christianity is all about you won't be able to restrain your enthusiasm. When any one of us finds something that really excites us half the joy is in sharing it with others.

Listen to Jesus: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Listen to Paul: "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice!"

Listen to the Psalmist: "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being."

Listen to the wise King Solomon writing in the book of Proverbs: "A merry heart doeth good like medicine."

My doctor sent me that last quote on a Christmas card one year. If his patients really believed and practiced that philosophy, the doctor would lose half his business. Maybe he was trying to cut down on his practice, I don't know. But it's true, to become excited and happy and enthusiastic over one's religious faith because he has found something he really believes and which gives his life new richness and significance makes any person a physically, as well as a spiritually, healthier person.

IV

Pretty soon now all of us in this church are going to be involved in a great and challenging project to build a home for the aging. If we would get one-half as excited about this project as we do about athletics, a new car, a new house, or our golf game, we could have all the money raised and the home built and running practically overnight. And the most significant thing of all is that not one of us would ever miss one penny of the money we gave to make it possible. The only time giving ever hurts is when we don't give enough. When we give generously and enthusiastically it always feels good. God loves all givers because he loves all of his children. But it is only the cheerful giver that knows and understands the love of God. The cheerful giver is always the generous giver.

What was it you said? "I can't get very excited this morning; I've got a headache." "I can't be very enthusiastic today, I'm concerned about my high taxes." "I'm feeling low lately because I'm out of a job." "Business conditions aren't good. Politics is a mess. Everyone else has it better than I have."

My friend! God is! God cares! You are alive! Somebody loves you! Your being is so important to Almighty God he is going to care for you and about you eternally. His spirit with its strength and power is going to be with you through every moment of life as long as you live. That's something to get enthusiastic about and to get excited about, to shout "Alleluias" and "Amens" about, to be everlastingly thankful about. You'd better believe it!

This morning we are not going to sing the last hymn listed in the order of worship. Instead we are going to sing a rouser! We're going to sing the third verse without the organ. If you ever sang with enthusiasm, let it be this morning. You will leave feeling 100% better than when you came. And while you sing, thank God that you're alive and can sing. The hymn is number 345, "Rejoice, Ye Pure In Heart". And let us really rejoice.