

“Turning Pity-Parties Into Praise-Parties”

Date: October 12, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 107:1-9; Philippians 3:1-9

Occasion: Pentecost 18

Theme: Attitude; Praise; Self-Pity; Thanksgiving; Positive Thinking

Source: Adapted from a sermon by Leonard Sweet, 2014.

After World War II, the world entered a time of conflict that came to be known as “The Cold War.” The two most powerful nations in the world, the United States and the Soviet Union, stood face to face and toe to toe, and seriously considered nuking each other.

Thousands of nuclear warheads were armed and aimed at each other, in a strategy known as Mutual Assured Destruction. The acronym for that policy was MAD. Even madder, or crazier, was the official response to this Cold War policy.

Fall-out shelters were constructed, both public and private, places where people could momentarily be “safe” while the surface of the earth was scorched by radiation.

Talk about mad, or crazy – school children were instructed to dive under their desks and cover their heads in case of a nuclear attack. “Duck and cover” was the 1950’s and 60’s version of “Dumb and Dumber.” What protection did a desk provide against a nuclear attack? Really?

It was during this Cold War era that a smart-alecky magazine was born. It wasn’t financed by some lobbyist group with an agenda. It was a comic book, called “*MAD*” magazine. It was a well-written critique of the craziness that was driving countries “mad.”

MAD magazine dared to lampoon the possibility of global annihilation. Written for an audience of 10 year-olds to 100 years old,

it encouraged people to consider everything they encountered with fresh eyes. *And*, the magazine was funny.

On the cover of *MAD Magazine* was a goofy looking character name Alfred E. Neuman. His nerdy, goofy face was on every cover, always accompanied by his personal mantra, “What, me worry?”

That silly line showed the powers-that-be that we could have no control over *some* things. And yet we could still have ultimate control over *other* things – like our faith. Nuclear warfare between the super-powers? We had no control.

Our own personal attitudes based on our personal faith? Oh, yes! We still had a personal power-source, that could handle whatever ugly scenario raised its head.

You know what? The secular world steals some of Christianity’s best lines, because we don’t know how to use them. *MAD Magazine*’s famous tag line of “What, me worry?” comes from the Apostle Paul, in spirit if not in exact words.

As he languished in prison, his feet shackled in leg irons and chained to a wall, Paul refused to focus on his personal situation. In fact, he called all disciples of Jesus Christ to a “What, me worry?” way of living.

Locked up, imprisoned, chained, Paul could still speak to his followers with a “what-me worry” attitude. Paul turns what could have been a pity-party into a praise-party. How did he do it? I’m going to tell you in just a minute.

I don’t know about you, but I am prone to pity parties, feeling sorry for myself, upset when things don’t always go my way. Joyce Meyer, the well-known Christian preacher from television says this:

“I used to have a real problem with self-pity. Every time the devil would throw a pity party, I would attend. One time when I was feeling down in the pits, a friend brought me a balloon and stuck it in my face saying, “here’s something for your pity party.” Great friend!

Now, if anyone had a right to attend, if not host a self-pity party, it was blind and deaf Helen Keller. And yet she wrote, “Self-pity is our worst enemy, and if we yield to it, we can never do anything wise in the world.”

So back to our text this morning, how did Paul turn a pity-party into a praise-party? Paul could find joy in every situation, no matter how difficult or challenging, because he had crafted a stockpile of praise.

To help our imaginations, I’m going to use the image of a cabinet. Of course this is an image and not an actual thing. But in this cabinet Paul would store things that were worthy of praise. And he filed them in different drawers.

First in Paul’s cabinet was a main drawer with one theme that dominated all of the other drawers: Jesus. Paul knew that whatever else happened in his life, Jesus was present with him. Even when he was imprisoned, beaten and scourged, Paul knew that Jesus was there with him. How could he have any worry?

Paul would frequently say in his letters that he was crazy in love with Jesus. Despite all the attacks and opposition, in spite of the beatings and imprisonments that Paul endured, he continued to preach the good news of Jesus as messiah. Why did he do it?

Paul continued to preach this gospel, because he was crazy in love with Jesus. The Jesus drawer was the first one to be pulled out

when Paul may have been tempted to have a pity party. Instead, he praised his Savior, over and over again. That's good advice for us.

The second drawer in Paul's praise cabinet is to focus on the good, and not the bad. He's in chains. He's confined in a horrible, filthy pit. But as he sat there in those nasty conditions, Paul urged those outside of prison to be extreme in their joy.

He urged those who followed and confessed Jesus as the Christ to rejoice and to celebrate the *good* around them, and not the bad. "Whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable," Paul says in verse 8 today, "think on these things."

His advice, to use my image? Pull out the gratitude drawer, and count the good things. Focus on the good, not the bad. These things bring praise. Psychologists are now confirming the importance of Paul's admonition to "be thankful in anything."

Here's something that you can do every day, to build up your storehouse of positivity. Every night, write down three things that went well today. Put them in a journal. Make a gratitude list. Fill your drawer with positive things.

It matters less whether what went well is big or small. What matters is that we're developing an attitude of gratitude. One psychologist asked a group of depressed women and men to do this for just one week. When they did it, their depression scores lowered by half and their happiness scores doubled.

Ever wonder why there is a rich tradition in Christianity of saying prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving? An attitude of gratitude chases away the self-pity blues, and turns them in praise parties!

The third drawer in Paul's praise cabinet is to trust in God's providence, and in the power of God's promises. Paul's words to those who follow Christ are, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." (vs. 9)

In other words, despite the dire realities of life, keep an attitude of trust and triumph. Trust the victory of Christ's death on a cross and his resurrection from the grave. That is the new reality. Not what we see on the news, or hear about from our whining friends. Christ is victorious.

Richard Rohr puts it this way in his new book, *Eager to Love (2014)*: "Once we can accept that God is in all situations, and he can and will use even bad situations for good, then everything becomes an occasion for good and an occasion for God, and is thus at the heart of religion..."

"God's plan is so perfect that even sin, tragedy and painful deaths are used to bring us to divine union. God wisely makes the problem itself part of the solution."

I don't stand here this morning to make light of your problems. I can tell you that God wants to make whatever problem you're having a part of God's greater solution, for you and those around you. That's the meaning of resurrection.

Open the drawers of your praise cabinet – focus on Jesus as victorious, focus on what is good and positive, and trust in God's promises. Let's not accept any more invitations to attend pity-parties. Instead, let's just praise the Lord. Amen?