

Sermon for Sunday, September 23, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW TO BE HAPPY IN SPITE OF YOURSELF"

St. John 16:16-33

Text: "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." St. John 16:33

The disciples experienced two failures that left them in utter despair. First, they were experiencing an apparent failure of the gospel. The message that Jesus brought had stirred their hearts from the very beginning and they had burned their bridges behind them to follow him. Now, with their bridges burned, it seemed that the road ahead was washed out. It was washed out because now people were rejecting the message of Jesus. At first people had responded. They said things like, "Never has man spoken as this man speaks." They said, "He speaks with authority." They marveled, "We never heard it on this wise." They exclaimed, "No man can do the things he does except God be with him."

But the message of Jesus didn't draw the crowds that last week as it had in the past. What he had to say cut right across the tradition and authority of the Jewish leaders. Now the crowds had melted away and only they were left. Jesus had talked about love for your enemy, but with the threat of being taken a prisoner becoming more and more real, Peter had strapped on a sword. Have you ever felt that way about the Bible? With your mind you know that what it has to say is good--that it is true--but somehow you are unable to apply it to your life? Somehow we feel the message has failed us. Maybe it works for somebody else that we hear about or read about, but caught up in the harsh realities of life, somehow it isn't working for us.

The second failure the disciples were experiencing was in Jesus himself. Judas thought he ought to take over the leadership of a rebellion and when he didn't, he got disgusted and turned him in for 30 pieces of silver. Peter thought he ought to fight, and when he wouldn't, he started swaggering around with his own sword banging against his leg. The rest of the disciples thought he ought to call down fire from heaven. But when the fight came, dangerous Peter only managed to cut off one ear and the rest of the disciples forsook him and fled. Whatever they expected of Jesus, he didn't do it.

Do you get to feeling like that about Jesus sometimes? You see the sort of trouble you are in and you know somebody needs to do something. You'd like to see Jesus swing into action and get the job done--but then he doesn't act in your life as you hoped he would or expected him to. I think it is true of all of us. There are times in life when the Bible just fails us and doesn't seem to mean a thing. There are times when Jesus is just unreal and useless because things don't turn out as we had hoped or expected. I know life has often caught me in that sort of trap and I'm sure it has many of you. Circumstances just crunch us in its vice and religion and Jesus seem unreal. What it gets down to is this: Can we count on Jesus or not? If not, then what can we count on?

I would like to suggest to you this morning that we can indeed count on Jesus. In our scripture this morning he has just told his disciples what is going to happen. They thought that both the message and the man had failed them. On Easter morning they were to find out they had been wrong. But back then they didn't understand how God works. If we understand how God works we can be happy in spite of ourselves. You see, in telling his men what was going to happen to them, he gave them three promises. If they had understood those three promises, they never would have thought he failed them. Let me share those three promises with you.

Here is the first promise: In the world you will have tribulation. Well, that's not a very good promise, is it? Perhaps you expected a better promise--a happier promise. But that's the promise he gave us--in the world you will have tribulation. Now, that cuts against the grain. Nobody likes to have problems. As a matter of fact, if you watch the TV advertising, all of it is geared to the promise that if you will use their product, it will make you happy, life will go smoothly, and all the good looking girls will chase you! But the fact is, life has its problems--it has its pain, its disappointment, its failures. If our happiness depends on everything going right and running smoothly and turning out the way we dreamed, we are in for a tremendous disappointment. Well, life is no TV commercial. It has its heartache and heartbreak. It has its desperate pains, its broken dreams, its awful hurts. But that is exactly what Jesus told us it would be like: In the world you will have tribulation.

Here is the second promise: (you may not want another promise after the first one!) "In me you may have peace." Please notice carefully what he says! He doesn't say that life will work out right, that things will always fall into place, or that events will turn out as you had hoped. No, in the world we are still going to have tribulation. What he says is, in me you will have peace.

What is peace for you? When you think of having peace, what do you have in mind? Well, the peace that Jesus promises is an inner peace. All about you the world may be collapsing, but the peace of Jesus sustains from within. You know, in the burial service of the Presbyterian Church there is a passage from the 14th chapter of St. John. It goes this way, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." Why would that be included in the burial service? It is a recognition that in Jesus there is an inner peace, even in the midst of the worst that life can do to you.

I see people trying to find inner peace in so many ways--they work hard, thinking if their business is a success they will have peace. Yet, when their business is tremendously successful, they feel frustrated and unhappy. I see mothers who think that if they have a nice home, keep it looking like something out of Good Housekeeping, and their kids stay out of trouble, they will be admired by the neighbors and they will be happy. Yet, I find that most such mothers are frustrated and unhappy even when they succeed. I see young people who think that if they can make it with the "in" group, or if they can have such things as a really sharp car, or if they can manage to be popular in some way that they will be happy. Yet, even when they succeed, I discover that in frustration they are smoking grass or popping pills and staying on highers because they are not happy after all. No, peace will never be found in the things around us. Peace will not even be found in the people around us. Peace is an inner quality of the heart and Jesus promises us that we will find peace in him. I'll tell you a secret. The people I know who really have peace, who have an inner serenity and calm no matter what life is doing to them on the outside, are the people who have the inner peace of Jesus in their hearts. They are withstanding the worst that life can do to them and there is an inner radiance. They are happy in spite of themselves. So, the first promise is that in the world we will have tribulation. The second promise is that we will have peace in Jesus.

Now, let me share with you promise number three. It reads this way: "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." That is one of the greatest promises in the Bible! It means that the world doesn't win out in the end. It means that pain and sickness and death and brokenness and disappointment don't have the last word. It means that sin and wickedness don't have the final say-so. Yes, in the end things get themselves worked out according to the plan of God. It doesn't

mean that things have a happy ending here on earth, but it does mean that unhappiness doesn't win out in the end.

That was the secret the early Christian knew. And because they knew that secret--that Jesus had overcome the world--they could face anything. They were persecuted, whipped, crucified, put to the sword and fed to the lions. Yet, they faced all that the world could dish out because they knew a secret--they knew that Jesus had overcome the world and in the end God's will and God's purposes for us would get themselves worked out.

That's what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him...who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Yes, Paul suffered a great deal for his faith, but he could handle the worst that life could dish out because he knew a secret--he knew that Jesus had overcome the world. It was in the confidence of that promise that he could be happy in spite of himself. Yes, promise one, we will have tribulation; promise two, we can still have inner peace in Jesus; and promise three, we can be happy in spite of ourselves because Jesus has overcome the world and all of life turns out in the end according to God's will for us. When we know that, we can handle life.

Not long ago I read about a minister who wrote a letter to a friend. On the back of the envelope he wrote, "Be of good cheer, brother." When the letter arrived, the post office had stamped across the message, "Against regulations." According to the tribulation that life brings, cheerfulness may be against the regulations, but we Christians know a secret--Jesus has overcome the world.

Perhaps you remember the story of John Paul Jones. One bitter day in the heat of battle he found himself deserted by his sister ship. His own vessel was raked by enemy fire fore and aft and the Richard began to sink. He was a beaten man. Yet, when the British commander asked him to surrender, he replied, "I have just begun to fight." He rammed his waterlogged ship against the nearest enemy vessel, boarded her, and soon the fight was over. Yes, courage, boldness, confidence in the midst of the seemingly worst disaster--the Christian is never defeated--he has just begun to fight--he knows a secret because he knows how the battle ends.

Dr. Edward L. Trudeau had tribulation in the world. As a young doctor he contacted tuberculosis and was sent to the mountains to die. But as he lay in his hospital bed, he found peace in Jesus. Because he knew a secret he began to dream of a hospital where he might help others. At Saranac today is a great tuberculosis hospital, a monument to a man who found happiness in spite of himself. He looked beyond tribulation and in the knowledge of the secret that Jesus had overcome the world he went on to achieve world-wide fame.

There are many of you here this morning who have desperate problems, deep needs. You have indeed discovered that in this world you have tribulation. I, too, share with you that tribulation. Yet, for both of us there is peace in our hearts that comes from Jesus. And there is a glorious assurance that tribulation doesn't have the last word. No, Jesus has overcome the world and in the end, no matter what life does to us, we know a secret--the secret that out of the worst that life can do, God's will is worked out just the same. And when we know that, we can be happy in spite of ourselves.