



Program #5204

First broadcast October 26, 2008

WELCOME

Daniel Pawlus: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Daniel Pawlus

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today is one of our long-time friends, author, teacher and pastor, Dr. John Killinger. He’s going to talk to us about keeping faith in God in times when we’re severely tested.

Daniel Pawlus: We also welcome back Otis Moss III, who will reflect with us on the topic of “joy.”

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of a woman who has made it her spiritual practice to live as simply as possible, not in a remote cabin somewhere, but in the heart of the city of Chicago. This is Anne Basye’s spiritual journey toward simple living.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Anne Basye: I written a book called “Sustaining Simplicity,” a journal. It’s a very personal story about a year in my life, living my version of the simple life. The way that we live our lives is the way that we can express our faith in the world. For me, the bottom line of simple living is living intentionally and understanding that the way you choose to live has consequences in the world. And especially, if you are a person of faith, to understand that the way you live is your opportunity to live out your belief. My version of the simple life is a big city version of the simple life. The biggest thing I think that differentiates me from most people is that I don’t own a car and I can live without a car because I live in Chicago. We forget that we can ride bikes. We forget that we can car pool or take a train.

I’m a writer. There’s a lot of paper lying around. I’ve never figured that out. This is probably a little less furniture and a little less stuff than what other people have. This isn’t a microwave, in part because the kitchen is so small. I don’t where I would put a microwave so I never got one. There is a TV but with this big shift in television that’s coming up next January, I don’t know that I’m going to bother to buy a new one. Sometimes I’ll be sitting on the front porch on my chair with my coffee and all of the sudden a big truck and trailer pulls up. For the next half hour it’s nothing but noisy two-stroke engines. It ruins the serenity of a morning.

Probably faith came first and simple living came as I realized what it meant to me to have less and spend less. And understanding that the larger implications of a culture that moves us beyond instant gratification to something we can’t even name, it’s so vast and instant. It’s a subject that matters a lot to me and since the book’s been published I’ve been invited to present at different kinds of church events or educational events. I’m committed to making those presentations because this is a subject I feel strongly about and I want to share. Clothes don’t matter to me so I don’t spend a lot on clothing. I don’t buy very much because I feel like I have enough already. Having time with my son, having time with friends and the community living around me, those were all things that were more necessary for me than a bigger space or a big car or other big

things. Abundance is a word that's used a lot in the church. It's defined often theologically in ways that are hard to grasp for the regular person, so it's no wonder that our own version of abundance went from plenty of food and lots of love and family, to lots of stuff. And I think that where God has a unique angle on the simple living conversation is our faith, the Gospel, hold up starkly different choices that we can be making and somehow there is a disconnect between the choices that we're exhorted to make on Sunday and the choices that we make Monday through Friday.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Daniel Pawlus: Anne Basye is a staff writer for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the author of "Sustaining Simplicity." For more information, you can go to our website at 30goodminutes.org. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker.

John Killinger first appeared on "30 Good Minutes" in 1989 and has made annual visits every year since. This past year he came out of retirement to spend eight months as Executive Pastor and Theologian in Residence at Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. He's the author of more than 50 books, including a soon to be released memoir called "The Other Preacher in Lynchburg: My Life Across Town from Jerry Falwell." We look forward to John's visits each year and are delighted to welcome him back. Welcome, John.

MESSAGE

John Killinger: Thank you, Daniel.

A few weeks ago, I was having lunch with a Jewish friend in New York. He's a musical therapist who works mainly with elderly patients who are invalid or dying. "I have a serious question to ask you," he said. "How do you deal with the problem of suffering?"

I took a bite of my sandwich and asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "how can people have faith in a world like this?"

I raised my eyebrows and continued to chew, as if waiting for further explanation. "My father barely escaped the Holocaust," he said. "He was living in a town in France where Hitler's troops rounded up all the Jews and sent them to the death camps. Fortunately, Father was away on a trip that day and learned what had happened, so he didn't return. He escaped. But most of my relatives didn't."

I thought about that while he came to his punch line: "How can you have faith in a God who permits that kind of evil and suffering in the world?"

I admit I didn't know how to answer his question without sounding either facile or merely superficial. It was a revelation to me that he had lost a lot of relatives in the Holocaust. I needed more time to think, because it was indeed a serious question. I promised that I would consider the matter and get back to him.

When I got home, I had a letter from a minister friend in Arkansas. It began with the words, "I hate the book of Job." I understood immediately what this friend meant. He has a terrible disease. Sometimes the medication he takes for it works, and sometimes it doesn't. The doctors frequently change his medications. As a result, his life is always up and down. Some days he feels good, but most days he doesn't. Physically, he's still strong. He's only 55 years old. But often the medications destroy his sense of balance and upset his nervous system. His feelings, understandably, bounce around like a bunch of ping-pong balls on steroids.

He has personal problems too. He and his wife divorced a couple of years ago. He had to give up his calling as a minister, and his physical problem has prevented his finding other work. He can barely live on his disability pay, yet his wife, who makes a good salary, keeps asking for more money. His only son has been overseas for months, acting in a play, and rarely communicates except when he needs something. My friend's mind is alert and imaginative, but he hasn't found anything to apply it to. I can see why he wrote, "I hate the book of Job." He didn't like identifying with Job, the man with all those troubles. He probably doesn't like it that many of us who know him identify him with Job.

What he was really saying was, "I know I'm like Job. I have more problems than anybody can believe, and yet I hang on to my faith. I still believe in God."

Because he does. He bears his troubles with the best attitude I've ever seen in a troubled man. Sometimes he writes about his sense of God's presence in spite of his terrible condition. Other times he writes about his pilgrimage, and how he is searching for the Spirit of God in the wilderness. Either way, he is a man of faith.

I knew immediately what I had to tell my Jewish friend. "You've got the answer right there in your own Bible, in the book of Job. Faith isn't something you throw out when life isn't going well. Faith is what you hang onto when it isn't. Holocaust or no Holocaust, you go on believing, because it's all you can do. Faith is pulling on a rope and knowing there's someone on the other end even though you're suffering terribly and wondering how you can hold on another day or another minute. Faith is remembering how it was to feel good and hoping you'll feel that way again, if not in this life, then in the next.

My wife had a wonderful maiden aunt. We called her Aunt Jen. Jen was horribly crippled by arthritis when I met her and joined the family. She lay in bed most of the day, getting up only to walk slowly and painfully to the bathroom. Sometimes, when we talked to Jen in her room, she said, "It won't always be this way. Someday, I'm going to wake up in heaven, and I'm going to run and leap all over the place like a young gazelle!"

That was faith speaking. It wasn't experience. It wasn't mere hope. It was faith. It was what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he said "Faith is the evidence of things not seen." Evidence. That's something that will stand up in court, isn't it? Paul must have seen examples of this to talk that way. He must have been an example himself. A man who gave up his entire career and way of life for Jesus after he encountered him on the road to Damascus. Who put himself in jeopardy again and again wherever he went. Who went to prison for his faith— many times. Who died for his faith. Evidence. He surely knew what he was talking about. "Faith is the evidence of things not seen."

Faith makes a big difference in how we deal with the harshest realities of life, doesn't it? When we're crippled with arthritis or having a hard time with our medications. When we've lost a job and can't find another. When our money doesn't quite cover the cost of living from week to week. When cancer shows up in our bodies. Or, even worse, when it returns after remission. When somebody we love is snatched away from us. When the world is in a mess the way it is now. When life devolves into pain and frustration and humiliation and loss. It makes a huge difference.

Somebody sent me a wonderful little e-mail a few weeks ago. It was accompanied by some simple line drawings, but I'm sure you can picture it without the drawings. It was about a woman who was having chemotherapy for cancer and was losing her hair. In the first panel, she had got up in the morning and looked in the mirror and seen that she had only three hairs left on her head. "Umm," she said, "I think I'll braid my hair today." In the second panel, she got up and had only two hairs left. "Oh," she said, "I think I'll part my hair today." In the third panel, she got up and had only one hair remaining. "Oh good," she

said, "I think I'll wear my hair in a ponytail today." In the fourth and final panel, she looked in the mirror and all her hair was gone. She was totally bald. "Oh, thank God," she said, "I don't have to do my hair today!"

Our attitudes have a lot to do with how we adjust to problems, don't they? This is what my friend was doing when he said, "I hate the book of Job." He was looking at his situation philosophically, and saying he hated to be in the same position as Job. But in saying it, he was dealing with it. He was identifying with Job's faith, and with what Job said when he'd had those great imaginative dreams in which God showed him all those wondrous creatures and asked Job if he could make things like that. Out of the depths of his suffering, Job responded: "I had always heard of you with my ears, O God; but now my eyes have really seen you. I repent myself. I bow down before you in worship and humility."

And my Jewish friend? Well, the evening after we'd had our conversation at lunch about faith, he wrote me regarding something extraordinary that had happened to him later that very afternoon. He had gone to visit a patient, a woman who was in a convulsive and agitated stage. Her family thought they were losing her. He began gently strumming his guitar and singing some soft lullabies and then some familiar old hymns she knew. Eventually, he said, she began to relax. The convulsions stopped. And, finally she opened her eyes and smiled at him, and began to respond to her family again. He was greatly moved by the experience. Because, in a way, you see, it was an answer to the very question he had raised at lunch.

How do you have faith in a world like this? You just do.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from John Killinger, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with John.

John, thank you for those words about the importance of having faith in difficult times. I was struck by, in recent years, how many books we've had come out promoting atheism and talking about how the church is responsible for various evils, from the Crusades on down, and that nobody in their right mind would want to be religious person. How do you respond to those critics?

John Killinger: That's a good point. I think you've just made the case and that is by identifying the message with the people in the church who keep faith alive at a time when so many reprehensible things are happening, often in the name of religion. I think the church, the positive thing about the church, is that many churches, most churches, are filled with simple, good people who are trying to stay alive and to deal with the exigencies of their lives and who are exhibiting faith in the process of doing that. Sometimes the church seems to get in the way as an institution, and I think that's what Dawkins and some of the atheists are talking about. They talk about the poisonous effects of the church through the years. In a sense, the institution has sort of mucked things up just as the institution of Pharisees did in Jesus' day. But Jesus understood that that isn't the final word. The final word is that God has mercy and compassion on the people who need faith in order just to get by from day to day. Churches are full of these people. Being a minister is a great privilege in that sense because you're always dealing with people who are looking for the real meaning of life.

Daniel Pawlus: John, you mentioned the power of having a good attitude and on your visits you always bring a positiveness with you. Can you speak a little bit more to that, how important that is? How do we nurture that in a spiritual setting or a faith community that feeds us on a regular basis?

John Killinger: Well, I think a lot of it is borne in our personalities. Some people have a more positive personality; some a more negative personality. I think it's important in churches to kind of decide that

whatever is going on, whatever fracas may be going on behind the scenes, however much problem a church may be having with a staff member or something like that, it's important that for the people who come to worship and the people who are using that as their springboard each week to the thoughts of inspiration that they need to live their lives, for there to be something positive. The hymns need to affirm the great, old faith. The prayers need to always remind us that God is there, God is listening, God is hearing, God is answering in various ways.

You referred to the fact that I had recently been at Marble Collegiate Church. It's amazing to me that at that great, old church on Fifth Avenue in New York, every Sunday as I would stand at the Fifth Avenue door to greet people as they left the church, I would meet at least half-a-dozen people from around the world who had come there because they had read Peale's books on the power of positive thinking. They are still attracted to that. I don't know why it is that sometimes we think we have to be dolorous and sad and downcast in order to be effective spiritually. There isn't anything downcast about the spirit of God!

Lillian Daniel: I would love to ask you a little something about your role as a writer. I'm a pastor who writes and I know that you have written more than fifty books which bowls me over! And there are so many people out there who would like to write and feel like maybe God's calling them to. What's been your secret in being able to be that prolific while you've been doing all these other things as well?

John Killinger: I'll tell you my secret, Lillian. I learned a long time ago from the English bishop, Steven Hale. Steven was the bishop, I think, of South Africa or it may have been south India. I don't remember. But he was a fine, old gentleman who, for all of his life as a minister, wrote practically nothing. And then suddenly when he retired, books starting pouring out. Somebody said, "Steven, what's happened to you? You used to write almost nothing and now you're writing all these books continually." His response was, "Oh, I just decided that anything worth doing was worth doing poorly!" I don't mean that entirely, but I think a lot of people get hung up feeling that they've got to write a perfect book. A book is always a team product. It's not just the author, it's the author and the editors, usually more than one. It's the producers, the managers who see all the things that have to be done and done so the book can come out. If you just see it as a process and realize that you can do something that isn't perfectly done but that expresses your soul and your being, then you can write. Now, that doesn't mean it will get published necessarily. These are difficult days for publishing.

But one of my joys, in recent years, has been to help people with projects like that who are working on them and guide them. There was a woman in New York who came to see me a few weeks ago who was having a terrible time in life. She had four children. She and her husband were no longer together and the children were in teenage years now. And her life was just hectic. But she'd been a registered nurse for years. As we talked I heard about all these wonderful experiences she'd had with people. I said to her, "You need to write these things." A couple of days later I got an email from her and send me the first piece that she had written. I advised her to send it to "Guideposts" magazine. And she was getting all ready to go and it was wonderful. She just needed to be told she could do it. She needed permission, I think.

Lillian Daniel: One of your hallmarks as a writer is that you tell these wonderful stories and they are stories that we can all relate to about people. I was curious. Do you check with the people before you tell their story?

John Killinger: Only if it's a bad story! I would not use the person's name if it were a story that casts some kind of shadow on a person. But as long as it's upbeat and so forth, I've never found that people minded. I've even told stories in a congregation where the people were there, as long as it didn't betray a confidence of any kind. But it's sort of shone the spotlight for a moment on that person who's doing a very Christian act or who was living in an exemplary way. I always felt that it made these people proud.

People like to be noticed for their good deeds.

Daniel Pawlus: We only have about 15 seconds left, John. When do we expect the next book?

John Killinger: In March. The Jerry Falwell book will be out in March. I lived with him for six years across town and it's a reflection on life in his town.

Daniel Pawlus: Fantastic.

Lillian Daniel: It sounds fascinating. Thank you.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: We turn now to another in our series of reflections on the "Fruits of the Spirit." Today, Otis Moss III, Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, reflects on "joy."

REFLECTION

Otis Moss: I once heard a minister by the name of Frederick Haynes say that happiness is what is happening around you, but joy is something on the inside that transforms things on the outside. There was a story of a young preacher, fresh out of seminary, who was preaching at a country church in western Georgia. The windows are up in the church and a breeze blows through and allows all of his papers to go all over the church. He has no sermon. But there was one woman who keeps shouting, saying, "Preach it! Tell it! Amen!" And after the sermon he knew that he had a terrible sermon, but he went to this older woman, this seasoned saint, and asked the question, "You know that my sermon was absolutely awful." She said, "Oh yes, it was terrible!" "Why was it that you were shouting so much?" And the woman says back, "Well, just because you didn't do your job, doesn't mean I'm not going to do mine!" When you have joy in your heart, it does not matter what someone else is doing, you are allowing the spirit of God to come through in any circumstance.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Otis, and our thanks again to John Killinger, Anne Basye, and you for being with us today on "30 Good Minutes." I'm Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. As we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org for more information about today's program and an extensive collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," may peace be with you in the week ahead.