A sketch of my 21 Aug 94 sermon in the Craigville Tabernacle
Copies available after the worship for those who fell asleep during the sermon &, upon awaking, suspected that they might have missed something important

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"SING FOR JOY TO THE LIVING GOD!"

The Psalmist (84) & this sermon's title invite, indeed command us to "Sing for joy to the living God." But suppose you're out of joy at the moment, or even have been out of joy for a long time? Well, then, sing to the living God, & the joy will come. In a Bible study on Acts 16 here in this room during the recent Craigville Theological Colloquy, we learned that that's what Paul & Silas did when two darknesses descended upon them: they "sang hymns at midnight"--a phrase whose meaning deepened in our minds as the Colloquy proceeded from that point on to its close....To begin the hymn-course sesssion after prayer here last Wednesday, I read Ephesians 5.15-20: "Be careful how you live, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."....Midnight. The other darkness that had descended upon Paul & Silas was prison: they were singing hymns at midnight in prison. And how did those earliest Christians behave when they observed that the days were evil? They attacked the midnights & the prisons & the evil with songs of joy to the living God. Now how do we behave when faced with our own troubles & the miseries of millions we read of on p.1 of our newspapers, hear from when we flip on our car radios, & see when we press the remote on our home tube?....We human beings are, under whatever woes & burdens, ours & others', as despondent or as joyful as we make ourselves. And Christian hymnody is an ever-present resource for joy through praise to the living God.

From the Ecumenical Lectionary for today, the first scripture, Ps.67, sets the tone for this week in the UCC Calendar & in the UCC daily Calendar of Prayer. We shall read it repetitively, you repeating each line after me....Now I shall read the alternative Psalm--84--in the Lectionary & Calendars....Our Gospel for today is some scattered verses in Luke 15: 6,9,22-24. My sheep was lost & is found! Let's have a party. My coin was lost & found! Let's have a party. My son was lost & is found! Let's have a party. The coin could do nothing to be found; the sheep could bleat; & the son could repent, & receive the father's grace--the heart of the Christian gospel! No wonder Jesus was accused of being a party-goer: he leaned toward JOY, & invites us his disciples to. He asks us to pray for the coming of God's Kingdom, the messianic banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb--with the implication that sin is anything that holds up that party & its joy. And he believed that by repenting & letting God throw a party for us, we have the power to make heaven happy (L.15.7,10: When even one person turns to God, it fills the angels with JOY & they say "This calls for a party!" & they have one.).

The rest of this sermon is **three stories** about how three very different people, on three very different occasions, came to joy. Their names are Bob, Samuel, & Ambrose.

Here is a joy story about **BOB**. The setting was this room, & the time was early this month in the first session of the hymn course now in process. We were discussing the meaning of a great hymn after singing it after reading the Bible passage on which it was based after speaking about how it came to be written, & Bob got so high on the hymn that he burst out, "Sometimes I think some hymns are as grand as the Bible!" "Even grander," said I, & a parable leapt to mind: "The flowers on the Tabernacle altar are grander than our garden. Early every Sunday morning, & some weekdays, I walk around our garden & gather flowers & greens so that Loree--it's usually Loree, she's better at it than I--can craft them up into something beautiful for God. Then I carry the bouquet to the Tabernacle & put it on the altar (actually, the retable). We invite you to come see our garden two houses behind the Tabernacle, but right now you can see a <u>compaction</u>, an <u>intensification</u>, of our garden. Now, that's what a great hymn is. It's a bouquet of truth, beauty, goodness, love, & hope gathered from the garden of the Bible. That's why the great hymns have such power to lift us into the joy of the Lord." That's why Loree & I are always eager to go to church: to be lifted by the hymns, even if we have some reason to suspect that the sermon will be no good. In teaching hymn courses, I hope to help folks see the hymns with new eyes & meditate on them at home, & in church before the service begins. Both my wonderful mothers did that, & great hymns were

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available to them in their hearts in their living & in their dying. (My mother on my side was Ada & my mother on Loree's side was Carrie.)

The second story is about **SAMUEL**, who was eager to talk with a biblical scholar as to how I see Jesus in certain OT passages: as a layman in a UCC church, he's teaching a running course on Jesus in the OT. Two years ago Samuel was reading Numbers, the 3rd book in the OT, & he was suddenly filled with joy. For some time he'd been reading the Gospels & considering converting from Judaism, his birth religion, to Christianity. Then, all of a sudden, this rush of what some students of creativity call "spontaneous integration." Now, to be fair to Judaism, we Christians must say that Jesus is in the OT only if you read it with Christian eyes. But that is exactly what the earliest Christians did (eg these two stories: in L.24. 27, the resurrected Jesus "explained everything written about himself in the Scriptures"; in Ac.8.35, Philip ran through the OT, "explaining the good news about Jesus"). But Samuel was converted to Jesus while reading what book of the Bible? NUMBERS! Loree & I alternate every night in reading the Bible to each other, & a few nights ago we finished. It's not all a bouquet or even a garden: some of it's a desert, or so it seems. Numbers, eg. To us it seemed like a wall. But to Samuel, it was a mirror: in it he saw himself. And then it was a window through which the light of Christ streamed upon him. And then suddenly it was a door into life in Christ, into JOY! I am a canonical Christian: I believe God has given us the whole Bible to expose ourselves regularly to throughout our lives, so that we shall be ready for the Spirit to speak to us in our changing moods & changing times & the changing stages of our pilgrimage.

Now for the third & last story, the story of **AMBROSE**, named after the bishop under whose preaching the great Augustine was converted. But Ambrose was no bishop; no priest; no Christian; no theist, Ambrose was an atheist in my Adelphi U. course in interpersonal psychology for business managers. When at the beginning of the first session I took about two minutes to introduce myself & included the fact that I'm clergy, Ambrose almost shouted "This is my first & last session! I want no course from any clergyman!" The assignment was to make a list on "Changes I should make in how I treat people," then choose the most important, & write a page on why that change. I caught him at the door & suggested he might put on his list how he treats preachers & said "See you next time." Next time, he read to the class what he'd written. It was on "I need to be less Scrooge-like to my employees." The assignment for the next session was to write on "How I've decided to go about effecting this change." At the next session, the students read aloud what happened when they made the changes they'd committed themselves to making. When it came Ambrose's turn, he read about a bookkeeper & a stockboy. For years the bookkeeper carried her left shoulder high & he'd never thought to ask her why. So he asked, & she said "It's been hurting for years," & he said "Would you like me to massage it?" & she, startled, said "Why, yes!" & he did, for a few minutes each day of that workweek, & after the Friday massage--no more pain! And there was joy in Ambrose's heart. The stockboy'd been there five years &, though a good worker, stuttered so severely that verbal communication was hard for him. Monday, Ambrose--instead of eating in the executive diningroom--took a sack lunch into the stockroom & sat on a stool next to the stockboy, who was so astonished that he forgot to stutter! All the rest of that workweek Ambrose sat on that stool, talking with the stockboy as they ate their lunches. No more stuttering. And Ambrose's heart was full of awe & joy....After that session, he confided in me that his wife was dying, & it was his bitterness that explained his outburst against me in the first session. I said "Is she dying away from or into?" He said "What the hell's that supposed to mean?" And I replied, "Ask her." And he did, & wrote about that experience a poem which now gets some use in hospices. It's titled "Dying Into."

Out of your own life you could tell me stories of how you & others you have known & know have come to joy. In life we have many happinesses; but when joy breaks through, we know the difference. And for us Christians, the deepest joy is that in Jesus Christ our Lord God has identified with our sin, so that in him we become identified with the righteousness of God. Let's give the angels an excuse to party!