

I recently read a pastor's post of an incident that happened at her church. She was standing at the door of the sanctuary at the conclusion of worship, greeting people as they exited. A woman enthusiastically shook her hand and with a smile on her face said, "I really enjoyed your sermon today, Pastor." Then she put her hand to her mouth, as if she had misspoken, and said, "Oh, excuse me. I guess it's not proper to say that I 'enjoyed' something at church, is it?"

How very sad that statement is. Now it may be that in this woman's experience she had seldom experienced a sense of joy at church, which would be very regrettable, seeing as how one of Jesus' favorite images of the kingdom of God is a feast, a party, a joyful celebration accompanied by the best foods and the choicest wines.

Sitting here in church, we sometimes forget how often Jesus not only talked of parties, but went to parties. Someday when we've got a few minutes, thumb through the gospel of Matthew and Luke and note how many times Jesus is at a party. John's gospel opens with Jesus making more Mogen David so that a wedding reception wouldn't flop. One of the criticisms leveled at Jesus was that he ate and drank- he partied - with sinners. We have just listened to another parable of Jesus in which he tells us that living God's way, the kingdom of God, is like a king giving a party for his son to which everyone is invited. An invitation to a wedding feast is an invitation to joy. What would our lives look like- what would the church look like - if we believed that Jesus' invitation to us is an invitation to joy?

Since reading this parable again I have spent the last couple of days pondering the concept of Joy. Some of you know that my sister's name is Joy. She has been my sister for 58 years and I've pretty much come to the conclusion that I'll never completely figure her out. But I have more hope for understanding the concept of joy and its related words joyful, rejoice, and enjoy. Joy is kind of like good art. Someone once said that it's hard to give a definition of good art, but they know it when they see it. The same thing can be said about joy. Most everyone can identify joy when they experience it, but it's hard to give a definition of it.

In our everyday speech, we often think of joy as being synonymous with happiness. Happiness is something that we do recognize easily. When someone is happy, they usually smile and laugh. Happiness is a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes you feel good all over. Our country's Declaration of Independence states that one of our inalienable rights as humans is the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is therefore something we believe we can achieve by our own efforts.

Even though we often use the terms joy and happiness interchangeably, I have learned that joy is fundamentally different from happiness, at least in the way the Bible uses the term. Christian joy is not a feeling we can achieve by our own efforts. It is rather an attitude - a way of looking at things - that is given to us by God.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul says something that sounds kind of farfetched. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Be filled with joy at all times. We might well wonder if Paul is serious, especially when we learn that he writes those words while sitting in prison. Seriously, who can have a sense of joy at all times? In Paul's defense, let me point out that he is not telling us to be happy at all times. That IS impossible. There is a lot of sadness in this world, a world of illness and accidents, unemployment and crime, terrorism and war. The most fortunate and bubbly of us can maybe be happy 95% of the time, but it is impossible to be happy all the time. There are times when we are sad.

But in the face of sadness, joy can still be present. That's because sadness is the opposite of happiness, but the opposite of joy is despair, and to talk about a Christian who despairs is a contradiction in terms. God gives us the gift of joy, which is the assurance that no matter how messed up and unfair life is at times, God still loves us. As Rob Bell put it in the first video our Lent small groups watched, God says to us "There is nothing you can ever do that can cause me to take my love from you. Nothing." When we come to understand that joy is a gift that God gives to us, and not something we manufacture on our own, then we can see that Paul is not so farfetched when he tells us to rejoice in the Lord at all times.

The parable of the Wedding Feast has a rather peculiar ending. One would sort of expect that after the initial guests turn down the king's invitation and he ends up inviting everybody that could be found, both bad and good, that the story would end there with a happy, predictable ending. But then there is this one guest whom the king discovers to be improperly attired. The man didn't bother to wear his tux for the wedding feast. And the king

says, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" And the man is speechless. So the king throws him out.

That seems downright unfair, doesn't it? We get the impression that the king has invited the very dregs of society to the party, so here is this wino who hasn't had a bath in three months and depends on the Salvation Army for his mismatched clothes, and the king throws him out for not having a tux? What did the king expect? What is the meaning of the wedding garment?

It is true that we can accept the invitation to come into God's party, the kingdom of God, just as we are. We need not be ashamed of things in our past. It is our very unworthiness that proves God's mercy and love. So, we can come just as we are BUT, we can't continue just as we are. And I think this is what the parable means with this metaphor of the wedding garment. We seat ourselves at the banquet table without a wedding garment when we allow our sins to be forgiven but we still want to hang on to them. The garment we are to wear is repentance, asking forgiveness for our failure to love God and neighbor and turning our lives to walk in God's ways. So God gives a warning: those who come to the party without the wedding garment, those who permit the fact that they can come as they are to think that they can continue as they are, will be tossed out of the party.

That all sounds pretty grim, doesn't it? If the message of the parable is more of that repentance stuff that many claim is a negative, gloomy message, it's understandable why the woman I spoke of at the beginning thinks it is inappropriate to enjoy oneself at church. But think deeply of the image that Jesus uses here. He compares repentance not to somber penitential exercises, but to the joyful image of putting on a wedding garment. Who ever thought it a sacrifice and a burden to change their clothes and put on festive garments in order to go to a banquet they had looked forward to for weeks? This dressing up and preparing for the occasion is itself a part of the celebration. It is full of joy and anticipated excitement. It is the joy of the bride who is preparing expectantly for her wedding. She knows for whom she is adorning herself. And this lends joy to the preparations and the dressing up, even though it takes time and effort. And that's why I invited you to 'dress up' today, to imagine that you are preparing yourself to attend the king's banquet.

We come to the king's banquet table each Sunday when we gather for worship. The liturgy, (the order of the service), is intended to engender, not inhibit, a sense of joy. We begin by preparing ourselves, getting dressed in our wedding garment, with words of confession and forgiveness. We hear again God's invitation as we listen to the living word of Holy Scripture. We bring our gifts to the host of the party. And then we gather around the banquet table for the feast- not the whole feast, but we get a foretaste of the feast to come.

In the communion liturgy today, pay special attention to the number of times the words joy and rejoice appear.

- We offer with joy and thanksgiving...
- Lift up your hearts (in joy).
- It is our duty and joy...
- You call your people to cleanse their hearts and prepare with joy for the paschal feast.
- We often close worship with a canticle that says, "Let everyone who seeks the Lord rejoice and bear the name of Christ. Send us with your promises and lead your people forth in joy."

One way to interpret Jesus' parable of the Wedding Banquet is simply this: we understand and catch the essence of the Christian life only in so far as we understand and catch its joy. May the joy that comes from knowing you are loved by God and forgiven of all your sins permeate every aspect of your being each and every day.