

A Place of Great Joy

Luke 15:11-32

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 15) 2019

Kyle Childress

Years ago I had a conversation with Jenny Fain, a brilliant and talented young woman who was in our church as a teenager. After graduating from Rice, she went to work for Teach America in New Orleans public schools in the aftermath of Katrina. She told me she taught in inner city New Orleans because “I’m called to be there.” She told me of the extraordinary challenges faced by the teachers and students in her part of the city and how each and every student counts. “There is an enormous difference between having 20 students or 19 students in class. When you have 19, you’re constantly worried over that missing 20th, and do all you can to find them.”

There is an old Jewish story about two brothers who were in the flour milling business. One of the brothers was married and had children, the other was single. They were equal partners in the business, and they made an agreement that at the end of each day, they would take any extra flour that had been milled and divide it into equal shares, and each brother would take his share home and put it in his storehouse. But one day the single brother began to think, “Here I am, unmarried with only myself to care for and my brother has a wife to support and children to feed. It isn’t fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should have more of the flour.” So that night, he took some of the flour out of his own storehouse and so as not to embarrass his brother, he went under the cover of darkness to his brother’s storehouse and secretly left the flour.

It just so happened that at that very same time, the other brother began to think, “Here I am with the richness of a family. I have a wife. I have children, and my brother has no one to take care of him when he gets old. It’s not fair to divide the flour evenly. My brother should get more,” so he too took some of his flour and under the cover of darkness, slipped it into his brother's storehouse. Every night, unbeknownst to the other, each brother did this, always amazed the next day by the mystery that somehow the level of flour in their storehouses never seemed to diminish. Until one night, their arms laden with sacks of flour, they met each other in the darkness and realized what had been happening all along. With tears of loving joy, the two brothers embraced there in the darkness. According to the old tale, when God saw this, he touched that spot on the earth and said, “This is where I will build my house. For my house must always be a place of great joy” (source: Tom Long).

The house of God – the place where God and people meet – is a place of joy.

How many of us would describe our faith as joyful? How many of us would describe showing up here on Sunday mornings as joyful? Now I know and you know that for anyone in any church there are times when we get up and do what needs to be done. We show up whether we feel joyful or not. There is an old syrupy church song that goes, “Every day with Jesus is better than the day before.” Well, sometimes that’s not true. A lot of days with Jesus involve going to the cross. Some days we keep on in our faith because we made promises to God, promises to each other, and promises to ourselves, and joy has little to do with it.

At the same time, remember that joy is not happiness. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit that’s grown by practice and cultivation. Sometimes it is exhilaration, delight, and sheer gladness, while other times it is quiet contentment. Loud or quiet, large or small it comes from living in Christ and at its source, joy is a gift.

Grace. It is a seed given by God and we practice it and nurture it so it will grow and become one of the defining characteristics of who we are, and who we are together.

So in the midst of both good times and hard times, we practice joy. And for those of us who bear down on trying to make this world a better place, joy might be even more of an essential. Anarchist Emma Goldman is reputed to have said, “It’s not my revolution if I can’t dance to it.” And that is certainly true of the Christian faith.

Some years ago, Episcopal priest and psychologist Corrine Ware, who lives in Austin and is a former Baptist, wrote a book called, *Discover Your Spiritual Type*. Somewhat like psychological studies on personality and brain-dominance types, this study seeks to help identify four primary spiritual types. Part of the goal of the study is to help all of us see the church as made up of various kinds of spiritual types, and that God’s calling toward wholeness is the call for each and all of us to appreciate each other and work together.

Ware says there are four basic spiritual types: (1) Head Spirituality – People who know God primarily through the intellect, who put an emphasis on words, and thinking. (2) Heart Spirituality – People who know God through experience and feelings. (3) Mystical Spirituality – People who seek God intuitively, and for whom the inner journey is essential. Prayer is contemplative, silent with much listening. (4) Kingdom Spirituality – People who know God by getting it done. Focus is on social justice and service, and who say, “I pray with my hands and feet.”

Remember that these types are tendencies. Most likely each of us have some of each type. And though we do not have time to go into all of these I bring them up to remind us that even our small congregation is made up of members with each of these four tendencies, and various combinations. But here's the thing: We're all called by God and given the grace from God to know joy and express joy. How the different four types experience and demonstrate that joy might be different but joy is still part of being a follower of the Lord.

One day, the Gospel of Luke tells us, Jesus was having a conversation with the religious leaders who were having difficulty with joy. These religious leaders, preachers and teachers, were the Pharisees who were loyal in worship and people of prayer. They were generous people, good people, who knew they had a responsibility to give their money to the poor and to feed the hungry. They honored the Scripture and studied it. They didn't make cheap compromises with the culture. They were people of strong faith. They were aware of their faith being in tension with the Roman Empire as well as their interpretation of their faith being in conflict with many of their fellow religious leaders: the Sadducees in Jerusalem. I wonder if this perpetual tension and conflict, often made these religious leaders raw and rigid and unyielding. Nevertheless, as the Gospel of Luke portrays it, they had a problem with joy, and especially they had a problem with the kind of joy that Jesus generated, joyfully eating and drinking with sinners and making merry with prostitutes and tax collectors.

So Jesus told them some stories, some parables about joy. He told them about a shepherd who lost one of his sheep and worried out of his mind, he went searching for it. And when at last he found it, he was overjoyed. God is like that shepherd, said Jesus. He told them about a poor woman who had only 10 coins and one of them got lost, so she swept the house high and low till she found that coin,

and she was so joyful about finding that coin, she threw a party to celebrate. God is like that woman, said Jesus. He told them a story about a father whose younger son took half the family fortune, skipped town, and foolishly threw all the money on high living and then came crawling home begging to have his old room back. The father was so overjoyed to see his son he never even thought about scolding him, but filled the house with music and feasting and dancing and laughter. God is like that father, said Jesus.

Wherever God is, is a place of great joy.

The House of God is a place of joy, because it is there we discover that what matters in life is not what we get but the grace we are given. It is there that we learn that what matters about us is not how hard we work and serve, but how deeply we are loved by God, not whether or not we have been properly vetted but that we are children of God. I think it is interesting that so many of us who are committed Christians stay outside the house of joy. Sometimes we're like the older brother in this story who would not go into the party. "What's that noise?" he said. "It's a party," replied the servant, "a joyful party. Your brother is home!" "A party for my brother? My brother who threw away my father's money? A party for my brother who has been goofing off and living in Las Vegas while I've stayed home and worked with homeless people and on climate justice, organized prayer vigils, led Bible School with the kids, and built three Habitat houses by myself, while he played golf, sat by the pool sipping big, bright-colored drinks with umbrellas in them? Now he comes sulking home broke and Dad gives him a party?"

But something different and strange happens in this story. The father comes outside the house, outside the party, outside the joy and merriment, out to the older brother, out to the Pharisee, out to all of us who have been bearing down. "What's wrong?" he asks. We say, "I've served you all my life. I've never disobeyed you.

And you've never given a party for me. I've always wanted to be joyful, but you never gave a party for me."

And then comes the gracious and loving reply. "Son, you are always with me. Always. Everything I have is yours. Everything. There has always been a joyful party going on for you in my heart and you did not know it. Now, come, come into the house, the place of great joy."

I think that part of what this is saying to us is that we will never really experience the joy of our faith until we realize that we are all outsiders who have been invited into the party of joy through no merit of our own. Some of us are like the younger brother, people who have wasted our lives, and some of us are like the older brother, people who have worked hard and who smolder with resentment because things are hard and responsibilities are heavy, and life is not fair. But the fact is, both are on the outside, both the younger son and the older son are on the outside, and it is God who invites us into the place of joy.

Part of our calling is to practice joy and enjoyment. It's why we have potluck lunches (like next Sunday). The issue is not that we need to eat – we can get drive-through and eat on the road if that is all that matters – but that in eating together we enjoy God and enjoy one another. And part of our calling is to practice joy and enjoyment in such a way that includes others who are outsiders – LGBTQ folks, immigrants, and more. There is a reason our church brand is the shepherd's staff. We are the lost who have been found. And we respond with joy.

And it also raises a related question: What are ways we go outside where the outsiders are? Perhaps we stay inside because we're tired and overwhelmed and busy, busy, busy? But are we missing out on the joy of finding other outsiders and inviting them in?

Tom Long read an essay in which a woman was reminiscing about her father. She said that when she was young, she was very close to her father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance. Eventually, someone would put on the “Beer Barrel Polka;” and when the music of the “Beer Barrel Polka” played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder and say, “I believe this is our dance,” and they would dance. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods and the “Beer Barrel Polka” began to play and when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, “I believe this is our dance,” she snapped at him, “Don’t touch me! Leave me alone!” And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

“Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years,” she wrote. “When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, “What do you think you’re doing?” He would look at me with sad eyes and say, “I was just waiting on you.”

“When I went away to college,” the woman wrote, “I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him.”

“One day I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the ‘Beer Barrel Polka.’ I drew a deep breath, walked over to my father, tapped him on the shoulder and said, ‘I believe this is our dance.’ He turned toward me and said, ‘I’ve been waiting on you.’”

Standing at the center of our life is the God who says to us, “Everything I have is yours. All that I am is for you, and I’ve been waiting on you. Let’s go in and dance.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.