

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God of Joy, this is another Sunday to proclaim your goodness, to proclaim the meaning of the Gospel throughout the world. This is the day that you have made; we come to rejoice and to be glad in this simple gift. In the joys we do not always take account of, we find that we are truly blessed to have life, love, and health in ways we always don't recognize. Indeed, God, you are the God of abundance when we only see deficit. We praise you for these and so many other ways in which you enrich us with your abundance. And so, we return to you with hearts leaping with joy and burdened with trouble. Hear the prayers of our speech and the prayers of our hearts as we lift them to you this morning.

Holy God, we come back to your house to remember the heart of the Gospel. We remember that Christ did not come to burden us with a list of "to-do's" but came to lighten our load with life abundant. Gracious God, let us remember your graciousness as we look upon the words of the Gospel with wonder and hope, that the Christ came to make life fuller for all God's children, worth the living. Let us see his miracles presenting the possibility of joy, the possibility of relationship, the possibility of overcoming dower obedience with joyful service. We pray all these things with joy in his Holy name as we pray the prayer he taught us, saying together...

SERMON

You know what? Sometimes church feels a bit stuffy. I'm going to make some changes. I think I'll just wear my Broncos Jersey while I'm preaching. After all, it's time to inject a bit of fun into worship. Fun. Let's be honest, we don't think of worship as "fun." We think of it as "obligation" or "mandatory" in a way that can easily make it dry, stale, and lacking joy. And why is that? We feel we have to put on certain airs. We have to be "right"

and “proper.” We don’t come to God as we are but make it about thinking the right things or acting the right ways. It’s a bunch of “thee’s” and “thou’s” when we don’t speak that way in regular life. Dost thou get it? We put on a façade for God when God is trying to get to the real us, the legitimate us. So, I’m going to lighten things up and show off my cheering preference today. How many object to this? Well, if you do, tough.

I kid you, of course, but the message underneath is has meaning. Do we get caught up too much in what we think is right and proper and must be at the expense of celebration, and, well, fun? I don’t know about you, but the classic image of Jesus I get in my head is dead serious. He has a very straight, strict face. He is the lording-over parent that you don’t want to disappoint. He has his index finger extended, ready to wag it at anyone who doesn’t follow the word of the law to its greatest extent. He never even has a smile. There’s only one problem with this: it’s not the Jesus of the Gospels. It doesn’t line up with what he does and how he acts. This image is a strict parent. This is the principle walking around with a ruler ready to smack the bottom of a student gone awry. The Jesus of the Gospels teaches us something different.

This is the first miracle of Jesus’ ministry recounted in the Gospel of John. It is not healing the sick. It is not a grand show of his power. Jesus is simply at a wedding with his disciples, and his mother tells him, “they are out of wine.” Now how does such a delightful celebration go on without wine, especially when it was a cornerstone of the celebration? She doesn’t ask him a question directly, just makes an observation. She might be nudging him to act, especially when Jesus seems like his mind is elsewhere. According to the New Interpreter’s Commentary, Jesus’ response is not a rude one when he calls his mother “woman;” it’s simply atypical for him to address his mother this way. He gives a little

protest, saying that his time for glorifying was not yet to be. In other words, he was not to be revealed yet in all his glory, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere, elusive. He wasn't at the celebration. Nevertheless, he hears his mother's seeming nudges and undertakes a miracle, starting to reveal himself. It was the first showing of the real Jesus Christ.

It begins with a simple request by the mother of Jesus: "do what he tells you." We hear that as a dry command that requires we don't think and just follow. We associate these words with demanding, with boring obedience, with following instructions so that we may be found in the right at the end of the day. But this is the beginning of something beautiful. Jesus' command here is not to make people be right but be faithful, which provides the opportunity to find abundant life. Here it is the wine that feeds the celebration; as we move throughout scripture, it becomes more.

The servants have large stone jars nearby. Jesus tells them simply to fill them, then take some of it to the chief steward. The steward is amazed, and, not knowing where it came from, summoned the bridegroom and asks him why he saved the good wine for last, when the bad wine usually comes out when all of the guests have had their good fill. This, as the text tells us, is Jesus' first miracle, the first "sign," it says; indeed, it is the first of many. And what a miracle this first sign is; it is a telling act of who the Savior and God are.

Think of all the things Jesus could have done with that first sign. The possibilities are endless. Nevertheless, he does nothing grand, for the entire world to see. It's not the scene of his birth with angels singing and shepherds racing. Indeed, it's rather...well, plain. He visits a wedding, sees his mother, and makes his first sign in turning water into wine. Let me say that again: he turns water into wine. The first miracle of the Great God come to earth as a human being is to turn water into wine. Within that simple act is a message we

have to understand well. In other words, Jesus Christ's first miracle was to celebrate and celebrate among all people. According to a commentary by Eliseo Perez-Alvarez, weddings were a time for enjoying a lot of wine, but the kind of wine you got depended on which table you sat at. The less prestigious tables got the cheap vinegar-y wine, and the higher tables got the good stuff. He makes the good stuff available to all. In other words, the goodness and celebration of God is available to all...we just got to choose to take it.

I think the seeming crankiness of Christ is intentional, trying to tell us something. It shows us how we often are around the possibility for life abundant. How often are we invited to celebrate and we choose to be elsewhere because celebration just isn't for us? After all, the Christian life gets to be so dull, right? Do this, don't do this, love those neighbors, love your ENEMIES...seriously, love your ENEMIES, especially when they're real jerks. It can amount to all these "do's" and "don't's" until we are following checklists. We seem compelled to go to leaders and say, "just tell me what to do" because we want to do everything right. Unfortunately, we have made this the Christian life so much so that we are afraid to get off that very narrow way in case we burn in the fires of hell. But when we get so attuned to following the word of the law, we forget the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law is joy: joy in wanting to follow the Christ, not feeling obligated to do this and that, to check off all the little boxes of faithfulness. It's about wanting to grow, to discern and learn where Christ has, is, and will call us.

As the Rabbi Jonathan Sachs teaches us, we are called to move to the golden mean of this call for fun and celebration. Between the two extremes is faithfulness. There is complete self-denial, which we call asceticism. There is the worship of pleasure, complete self-indulgence, which we call hedonism. In between the two is what we can call the

sanctification of pleasure, where Jesus' call resides. It is understanding that God offers us goodness, and that we approach it as something holy. It is not good for us to deny or to indulge too much in the goodness that God gives us, but God does indeed offer us the opportunity to enjoy the good things God gives us. God wants us to have fun with the way that we live our lives and serve God. Indeed, God wants us to find abundant life. God wants us to celebrate and enjoy all the blessings that life has to offer.

What we do is ask God to make us happy when we are the ones who often are preventing ourselves from finding abundant life. We look at everything in our lives and make the inconveniences, not the true struggles, roadblocks to abundant life. One book I have found meaningful is *The Holy Longing* by Ronald Rolheiser. His mission is to seek out what an authentic Christian Spirituality looks like. He provides four pillars non-negotiable to faithful Christianity. The first is private prayer and morality. You have to be personally faithful with your spiritual practices, reading, and prayer. The second is social justice. You have to be concerned with God's world and making sure that all of God's children have what they need to thrive. The third is community as integral to worship. You can't do it alone; you must be a part of a larger group on Sundays and throughout the week to live this Christian life together. The fourth is the one that most often gets lost. He calls it "mellowness of heart and spirit." In other words, you need to have it all in perspective; you have to have a sense of humor and a sense of fun! You have to have a grounded spirit of generosity; in other words, if we do all that we do in the Christian life out of a sense of obligation or grumpy obedience, the point is lost. He tells the story of a young committed nun who did everything to be faithful. She prayed vigorously. She observed the Eucharist every day. She and her community lived so humbly so that they could give as much as they

could to the poor and needy. Her heart was so devoted to the principles of Christ that she looked like a Mother Theresa clone. But one day, she and her community went to a conference where they worked hard for four days and had the fifth day off. So, the day was decreed to go about the city to shop and then finish the day with a special gourmet meal. Just before the conference ended, the young woman spoke about her experience of grace during the conference. She spoke that on that day she was angry because a day of rest was called. While her friends were shopping, she was fuming. While they were eating that gourmet meal, she sat angrily in the bus. She was seething because everyone else had missed the point. While they were gallivanting around, they missed their calling to attend to the poor! In anger, she asked herself with satisfied self-righteousness, "Where would Jesus be while they were eating this frivolous meal?" With horror, she realized that Jesus would be eating with them and enjoying that time together. Like the Grinch, it seems, her heart grew three sizes that day. The conversion, the growth she needed was realizing that Christianity wasn't just about following the lessons to the letter but realizing that the intention behind them was life abundant with, as she said, "celebration in your heart." She said she became like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, screaming out "Why do they get grace when I have always done everything right?" Rolheiser quotes T.S. Eliot well here: "The greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reasons."

The Christian life can be the tool to use anger in the wrong way. It's easy to do that when we approach our faith with anger and bitterness in our hearts. When we are more occupied with who observes their faith incorrectly than loving our neighbor, it's time to take a new look at the Christ. When we judge people with more vigor than we give to finding joy in our own lives, the balance has gone way off. No doubt, the Christ was serious

and had a serious mission; he talked about the Kingdom of God in a world that rejects its ways. He worked on the underside of society, hanging out with the prostitutes and tax collectors when so-called “respectable” people wouldn’t even acknowledge “those people.” But, he also had a fun side, a side that respected our need for celebration...no, that’s not right; he *fosters* a spirit of celebration. Sometimes life stinks, no doubt about it, but our Christ affirms that, at its base, life is good. We don’t acknowledge it enough: life indeed is good. If this miracle shows us anything, it is that he knew how to celebrate and show others how to seize life abundant. After all, this was a wedding, one of the greatest times of celebration in life. He doesn’t poo-poo the celebration; he makes the celebration even more possible. And, indeed, in the best and the worst parts of our lives, the Christ makes the possibility of celebration and abundant life always possible. Thanks be to God for this great gift and great responsibility! Amen and Amen.