

## **Have Fun at the Party**

Philippians 4:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 22:1-14

October 12, 2014 Pentecost

15A

Many of us remember our childhood joy of being invited to parties, or our anxiety wondering if we would be invited, or our heartbreak when we weren't. Of course, we might have said, "I didn't want to go to that dumb old party, anyway," but deep inside we still felt rejected. Or maybe it was our own birthday, and we wondered anxiously if our friends would come and celebrate with us. Still, we were afraid of being rejected.

When Jesus told the parable of the king's wedding feast, he was feeling some frustration, a lot of rejection, and even some heartbreak of his own. The people that he wanted to reach with his good news of God's love just weren't buying it. They were missing so much! So he told them a whole string of stories about people who reject what they should have accepted. This story from our Gospel lesson was one of those. It was about a great banquet with an impressive guest list. The king's son was getting married! The guest list was like a who's who! Everyone who's anyone will come! It will be the social event of the decade, or even the century, like a royal wedding in England.

But nobody comes, and they RSVP with the flimsiest excuses. They snub the king. Can you imagine getting a hand-delivered invitation to come to the palace for a wedding banquet, and saying, "no thanks, it's my night to floss my teeth." There used to be a song by the Medical Missionary Sisters, and it had a chorus like this:

“I cannot come to your banquet, don’t trouble me now; I have married a wife, I have brought me a cow. I have fields and commitments that cost a tidy sum. Pray hold me excused, I cannot come.” Not only were the people rude and unresponsive, some even attacked the messengers! So, after being rejected, the king sends his servants out to bring in all that they can find, even the dregs of society.

To understand what’s going on here, let me tell you that there was a Jewish teaching at that time about what would happen after the Messiah would come, would conquer God’s enemies and make everything right in the world. There would be a great banquet, a Messianic banquet—a great and glorious victory feast with the high priest at the head of the table next to the Messiah, then the other priests, then the leaders of the synagogues and the political and economic leaders, and so on, down the line. Those excluded would be gentiles, the outcasts, the dregs of society, and the lawbreakers. So Jesus was turning that whole story on its head! The Messiah’s banquet hall was bigger than any one ever imagined, and it was going to be filled up—just not necessarily with those who were first invited.

There’s an odd little twist to the story, where someone comes and doesn’t wear a party robe, the accepted attire, and gets tossed out into the cold. It sounds odd. How could they expect a poor person to have the right clothes? Believe me, this isn’t about whether or not you should dress up appropriately for church; it’s about our attitudes not our wardrobes. In those days, if a wealthy family was throwing a party and the guest didn’t have the right clothes, the family throwing the party would supply the robe for them to

wear. The party-pooper in question was dragging his heels. He refused to accept the robe offered to him. It's like he was saying, "You can make me come to your dumb old party, but you can't make me have a good time." Another way to understand this twist is to remember that new Christians in the time of Matthew's church wore baptismal robes when they were baptized. It marked the beginnings of a new life, of new dedication to Christ. Matthew looked down upon half-hearted Christians who weren't committed to the cause enough to take the risk of being baptized, and so he was saying that the lukewarm Christians who wanted to wear the crown but not bear the cross would be the ones kicked out. Ellenita Zimmerman put it best I think, "It is true that God loves you just the way you are. It is also true that God loves you too much to let you stay that way."<sup>i</sup>

We're all invited to God's party. God wants us to enjoy the party, to have fun. But once we accept the invitation, we have to be open to let God transform our lives, to give ourselves over to God's love. Then the fun comes in sharing the love, sharing the good news, and inviting others to the party.

In the last chapter of Philippians, Paul also speaks about Christians being clothed, but he talks about being clothed in a special attitude, the attitude of Christian joy. Are you saved, are you filled with God's love, he asks? Then show it. Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! God is throwing a great party, and we're part of it, so let your face show it. Not only that, but live your lives as befitting people given such a wonderful gift.

The Philippians were good, loving Christian people, who gave generously, who prayed fervently, who filled Paul's heart with joy. Were they perfect? Of course not.

Churches are never perfect, because they are made up of people, people like you and me. Paul mentioned at the first of the passage that two leaders in the church, Euodia and Synteche, should patch up their differences. Ironically enough, if you translate their names from Greek, they mean “pleasant aroma” and “dwelling together.” Yet they were raising a stink and disrupting community! These two women previously had worked hard to build up the church, but now they disagreed and were causing division in the church. Paul asks another person, unnamed, to help these two resolve their dispute. Your common faith is more important than your differences, Paul seemed to be saying to them. If only Christians believed that and acted upon it, there would be a lot less church fights, a lot less church splits, and even a lot fewer denominations. That’s one of the strongest witnesses that we as Disciples of Christ have—that unity in Christ is more important than uniformity in dogma. Don’t let disagreements weaken the church, Paul was saying. Now remember—these epistles were written to be read aloud as part of the worship services. These two disagreeing women would hear this, and Paul wanted them to patch things up. Paul wanted the whole congregation to help them become reconciled.

Of course, Paul didn’t end with this note. He calls them, as he calls us, to true joy in faith. Like Jesus when he preached about the great banquet, Paul knew that the Christian faith should be a joyous thing, something to celebrate. “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.” Christ is with you, so don’t be anxious. Anxiety and fear causes conflicts; whether it’s between Euodia and Synteche, or between whites and blacks in Ferguson. In Christ we can find the antidote to anxiety and fear—

trusting in a loving God. Paul doesn't stop there. He tells us to pray regularly, so God knows what's on your mind. As we let God's Spirit into our lives, God's peace will stand watch over us. And God's peace brings with it the kind of joy that makes a church that likes to party. Joan Bell Haynes, the Assembly speaker that I quoted earlier as saying "Good Morning, God's Beloved," also said, "Jesus Christ looks good on you." So come to the party. You are invited. Don't worry that you're not good enough. God thinks that you are, and that's all you need to worry about. Share the joy that God plants in your heart, and watch that joy multiply as it is shared. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted on "Lectionary Lab" blog on Textweek.com.