

Party!
Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:1-10 and John 2:1-11
First Presbyterian Church
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Thirty-eight years ago, Richard Foster wrote a transformative text from the Quaker perspective entitled *Celebration of Discipline*. In it, he contended that spiritual disciplines become nothing less than the door to liberation. “Superficiality,” he wrote, “is the curse of our age. The desperate need today is not for . . . intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

He went on to offer helpful direction about meditation, prayer and study; simplicity, submission and service; confession, worship and guidance. As you and I listen to this list today, it is easy to conclude that the experience of following Christ each day in the world is a somber, serious endeavor, weighty, even heavy in its responsibilities.

Sometimes you and I listen to the admonition of the Scriptures to share the great good news of Jesus, to work for peace and justice in the world, and it is easy to feel that God is sitting at some cosmic table in the sky, looking down on our lives, ready to measure and judge our every move on some divine checklist. Good enough? we imagine God wondering. Good enough?

But I believe the image of the Holy in our midst is far different than that false conception. Instead, it is well represented by the wonderful experience I enjoy almost every Sunday morning at the start of our eleven o’clock worship service. The music swells and the opening of the processional hymn begins, and the choir strides down the center aisle, lifting their voices alongside ours in joy and praise.

They move past the font and table. They walk to their pews in the chancel. I watch them from my perch behind the pulpit. Many of them are focused on their offering, singing to God’s glory with their best energy and intention. One of them goes further. As she passes the font – where we are washed clean from any power of the world to blemish our souls – and as she approaches the table – where we find strength for the journey, spiritual carbo loading for the energy of homemaking, housecleaning, childrearing, and living out our vocations in the workplace; loving, forgiving, forbearing and persisting – she cracks a huge smile. Her face is alight with joy and exultation, rejoicing in our opportunity to celebrate God’s holy presence and join in praise and thanksgiving.

She smiles at our chance to do together what we do each day – celebrate God’s great love and offer our lives to others with gratitude.

She is caught up in celebration.

If you go to the web and enter “Happy First Presbyterian Church Allentown,” you will find a sweet four-minute video from the Presbyterians of that eastern Pennsylvania congregation. It is four minutes of celebration, set to “Happy” by Pharrell Williams. The participants are dancing and clapping – Presbyterian Women circle members, children on the preschool playground, pastors in their robes and stoles, volunteers behind the sound board, handbell ringers, praise band members, women on retreat, an octogenarian lifting her cane, and a high-kicking line of Presbyterian Men. There is no sermon, no “message,” no moral lesson, except for one quick three-second tag with this line: “The art of happiness is to serve all.”

The Presbyterians in Allentown are partying.

This discipline, this spiritual practice, is the one with which Richard Foster closes his book. “Celebration,” he writes, “is at the heart of the way of Christ.”

At every turn, today’s Scriptures proclaim that Christian faith is a celebration, a party of no small measure. “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,” the prophecy of Isaiah promises the people of Zion. “You shall be called My Delight . . . for the Lord delights in you.” “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

Charles Wesley, the great Methodist hymn writer, composed 6,000 hymns in the eighteenth century. I began whistling one of my favorites as I was composing this sermon.

Rejoice, the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore!

Rejoice, give thanks, and sing, and triumph evermore.

Lift us your heart; lift up your voice!

Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Why do we Christians party? Why do we rejoice? The message of this morning’s psalm is as clear and cool as a glass of lemonade on a hot summer day.

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains.

How precious is your steadfast love!

With you is the fountain of life. In your light, we see light.

God’s love protects and defends us, names and claims us, strengthens and encourages us, enlivens and revitalizes us. God grants us nothing less than the water of life and the light by which we live our lives.

That is why we serve with dedication and joy. That is why we sing and whistle and hum and dance and tap our toes. That is how we discover that the art of happiness is in serving Christ.

For the last three days, Thursday through Friday, almost a dozen pastors gathered here in Sarasota at our church. They came from Boise, Idaho; Providence, Rhode Island; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and all points inbetween. David Lose, the president of Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia, and Leanne Van Dyk, the new president of Columbia Seminary in Atlanta, joined us.

We wandered the grounds at the Ringling Museum. We enjoyed good food. We sat around in the evenings and laughed and sang and talked. We talked long and hard about the church and its future in our changing context. None of it could have happened without the help and assistance of several in the circle of our church.

John gave us an excellent tour of Ca’ d’Zan. Lydia helped make it happen. Rachel and Lisa and Pam took care of hotel reservations and a box lunch and all kinds of logistical arrangements. Drew drove the church bus. Adam hooked us up with a great restaurant. Jane came in on Saturday morning to make sure we had all we need.

And there were no long faces, no sense of burden or duty or obligation. Instead, there were smiles and joy and quiet celebration.

For together, stretching across the thousands of miles between Boise and Providence and Milwaukee and Sarasota, we know that God’s love is precious, and in God we discover light and life.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by changing water into wine. We may wonder: Why not a healing or a resurrection, a clear demonstration of transforming spiritual power? Instead, if we read the story as if for the first time, the scene seems ordinary, even banal.

We think back to the occasions when something has gone wrong at the wedding or the reception. I remember the occasion when the groom could not get the ring off the ringbearer’s

pillow, the time when the bride and groom forgot the roses they had thought to present to their parents, the setting when the wedding party realized they had made no plans in advance for anyone to clean up after their reception while they departed for their honeymoon. Each moment of anxiety became a moment of grace, as means were provided and solutions were found.

So it is in John's Gospel. His mother, Mary, points out that they have run out of wine. David Lose, the Lutheran seminary president who was with us here in Sarasota over the last three days, points out that this was a big deal. "The hosts run out of wine. Inconvenient . . . and perhaps embarrassing, but is it really such a big deal? *Yes*. Because in this time and place, running out of wine too early isn't just a social *faux pas*, it's a disaster. Wine isn't merely a social lubricant, it is a sign of the harvest, of God's abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality. When they run short on wine they run short on blessing.

Jesus, he goes on to share, provides "not just more wine, but more wine than the whole crowd could have drunk not only during the three days of the wedding feast, but probably across three weeks. In changing the water of those six large basins of water for purification, Jesus is providing close to an additional *one thousand bottles* of additional wine. And not only that, but as the steward discovered, it's not just a cheap bottle of Chianti, but the best wine yet served."

This miracle of celebration, I believe, teaches you and me three things about God's gracious presence in our lives and world. First, God's grace is a sign. It points beyond the moment to something deeper and truer, filled with meaning and purpose. As Drew drove the bus and Jane cleaned up the coffee spill this weekend, they pointed beyond themselves to something greater and deeper. So it was for our youth advisers who accompanied the youth to Cedarkirk, the Presbyterian Women who hosted the one-woman show of Harriet Tubman's life, the choir and praise band who sing and play their hearts out to the glory of God each week.

Second, God's grace is abundant beyond measure. One thousand extra bottles of wine, when maybe thirty or forty may have more than met the need. Forgiveness from one we have wronged, when we would give anything for it. Smiles and laughter and singing and dancing when we are broken and defeated – or bitter and angry – or depressed and afraid, reminding us of light of and life.

Third, God's grace is transforming. It does not leave us alone and does not leave us as we were. Instead, it changes us into people who clap and tap and whistle and hum and sing and party, celebrating God's goodness each and every day.

The opportunity for us today is not to recognize the celebration around us – for every service around cross and pulpit and font and table is a glad celebration. Instead, it is to take the celebration out into the world.

What would happen if we walked through Payne Park after worship – or through our neighborhood – smiling at every person we meet? Or resolve to offer a smile to every person we encounter at the market, the service station, on the street corner, each day this week?

What would happen if we resolved to take this morning's bulletin and find one opportunity for servant leadership in the next season in which we offer our best with joy and gladness? It may be praying for John and Thom, our new officers, each week. It may be serving as an overnight host with our homeless guests the second week of February. It may be serving as a table parent or teacher with our children in church school or at LOGOS on Wednesdays – or with the youth at Montreat or Massanetta or in West Virginia this summer?

What does God's gracious presence look like? and smell like? and taste like?

How can we take the party out those doors so that our friends and neighbors celebrate the joy and goodness of life in Christ?

Let's go find out.
To God be the glory.