Easter 2012 - #3

April 8, 2012

A Lenten sermon series on the prodigal son made sense to me for this year because of its conclusion sounds a lot like Easter. The father proclaims, “My son was dead but now is alive!” In telling this story, Jesus gives us a clue as to how we should celebrate the fact of the Son of God coming to life. What did the father do to celebrate life? He threw a party! He killed the fatted calf and invited everyone the whole community to the feast.

One of the under-appreciated and acknowledged facts of the Bible is that the kingdom of God is often compared to a great party and feast. Besides the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus often talked about the kingdom is like a wedding banquet. In Deut. 14, the people of God are commanded to save some of their money and crops to throw a party. God loves a party. Who knew?

So we gather today for a party. The son was dead and now is alive. We celebrate with candy and eggs and lilies and family gatherings. As evidenced by the older brother in the parable, not everyone is going to accept the invitation to the party, to truly celebrate.

In a world that is cynical and violent and impassive, we are called to model something different. We’ve been invited to a party to celebrate life. It’s not that we are sticking our head in the sand about the problems of the world or even our own personal problems. I’m willing to bet that everybody has some problem, something that causes you anxiety. Amen? Not one of you would say that the world or your lives are perfect. Maybe when we allow our spirits to show up for the party, we forget our problems for a minute and remember that we worship a God who is bigger than any problem we have, we worship a God who is bigger than death and evil and destruction and despair. We worship the God of Easter.

We know we have problems. We know evil still exists and plagues us and people we love. Yet, WE celebrate because we know that there is a bright and sunny side of life, too. Easter reminds us that even when humanity is at its worst, like when Jesus was nailed to that cross—even then, God can still bring about redemption and new life.

Yes, there are problems and concerns, but they don’t have the power to define us, to be the only thing in our lives. We need this annual celebration to remind us the life is good, God is good, that there is hope, that life is something to be celebrated. Not only do we need this annual celebration, this refocusing of our attention, we need it weekly. The early church proclaimed that every Sunday is Easter Sunday. Every week, worship is a celebration and an affirmation to the goodness of God.

That may come as a surprise to some folks who have been taught that God is basically grumpy, you should always feel guilty and like you can never do enough to make God happy. People who have grown up this way sometimes don’t get what we are doing. We aren’t dour enough for them, we aren’t preaching messages about how bad everyone is and how the world is going to pot. No, we are Easter people who raise their voices in defiance of a world gone mad to say that there is still goodness, there is still a relentless surge toward life and that God can redeem anything and anybody.

That’s the message of the Prodigal Son. When the son comes to his right mind again and comes back to the waiting Father, the father hikes up his tunic and runs, not walks, runs to greet the son and to give gifts. Jesus said that what brings the most joy in heaven is even one sinner who repents, who wants to make a fresh start, who turns toward God in their misery. Maybe that is you today.

Today we celebrate the fact that five (6?) young people are being baptized and making a public confession that they are turning their lives toward God. They promise to serve Christ as their Lord and Savior and promise to follow his way of love, peace, gentleness, integrity, truthfulness, compassion and service. There is a lot of rejoicing in heaven today. And there should be amongst us. Because as we witness these young people taking this step of faith, we can all reaffirm our faith and our hope and commitment to be disciples of Christ.

On this Easter Sunday its worth remembering that we are to be about the kinds of things in this world that bring God joy. The good news is that when we participate in the things that cause God joy, we are given deep joy in our hearts. It’s the kind of joy that the circumstances around you cannot diminish or take away, unless you let them. Don’t let them.

So what causes God joy? In the first book of the Bible we read the words of the creation story. God looks over what God has created and God says, “It is good!” When God created humankind in God’s image God said, “It is good!” What God creates causes God joy! Each flower, a masterpiece. Each mountain, a work of art. Each bird, and engineering marvel. Each baby born, a gift from God’s own hands.

What else? What else causes God joy? What about those moments when God’s will is done:

* When an enemy is loved
* When bitterness gives way to forgiveness
* When relationships are reconciled
* When someone offers radical grace
* When we give generously
* When we serve with humility
* When we love unconditionally
* When we suffer hopefully
* When we endure patiently
* When we trust unquestioningly

A little party breaks out in heaven every time we do or witness such things, large or small!

Today we gather here to share in God’s joy! God’s story does not end in the tomb. Death does not get the last word. Humanity at its worst – does not get the last word. Hopelessness and despair do not get the last word. New life can emerge from the ruins of our lives when we turn to the creative power of God. And when we tenaciously cling to the power of that truth – there is joy in heaven! Are we going live our days looking like whipped pups or like people who believe in the God that can bring life out of a stench-filled tomb.

Yes, there is suffering in the world. Yes, we have problems to face. Yes, people experience pain and anxiety. Yes, we have work to do. But isn’t our work to change mourning into dancing – sorrow into joy? Isn’t our work to welcome the sinner and celebrate reconciling love? Isn’t our work to carry the joy of resurrection into the stench-filled air of this world?

Today, whatever is going on in your life, there is cause for joy. We have young people being baptized! We have good news to share! We have hope. God has not surrendered God’s world to the worst that humanity can dish out. The cross does not get the last word. The tomb does not get the last word.

Today, there is a party invitation with your name on it. It’s yours for the taking. Of course, you are free to hang on to your anger. You are free to cave in to despair. You cling to your bitterness. You can wear your sour face. You can give up on the world. You can say, no thanks, I’m too busy to celebrate. But where is the joy in that? As for me, I’ll take any glimmer of joy that I can get. How about you?