

October 9, 2011 17th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 22:1-14

There's a little saying which goes, "Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. Never forget that the devil fell by force of gravity. So a good joke is the closest thing to divine revelation. They who have the faith have the fun."

(Unknown source, internet)

The First Reading, Second Reading, and Gospel Reading for today all point to happiness and joy in God. Isaiah speaks of a giant banquet of wonderful foods that God makes for all people. In Philippians Paul writes about rejoicing in the Lord always. In Matthew we have the parable of the wedding banquet where the king, who represents God, throws a lavish party. There's some problems with the guests, and we'll come back to look at that, but still the root of the parable is celebration.

The root of Christian faith is joy. Our beliefs should not be a burden, and when they become nothing but a burden we're doing something wrong. The root of it all is this: God loves us. And God loves us very much. And God has done all the work

in order to save us from these lives of death and instead bring us to eternal life with him. That's great news!

Jesus starts off the parable, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." Has God created eternal life for it to be a drudgery? Are we to work and slave and worry forever and ever? Of course not! Over and over again the Bible tells us that eternal life is exciting and wonderful and something to look forward to. That joy comes into our lives here and now.

Now from an advertising perspective you'd think the Christian message would be an easy sell - eternal life, absolutely guaranteed by God, no work necessary. Just accept it and everything else will come together. It's the perfect product. Everyone needs it, and everyone should want it. But they don't always. Why?

Our gospel reading gives us some insights. The parable is pretty straightforward, although it does play on ridiculous extremes. The king, representing God, throws a huge wedding banquet. But the invited guests decide not to come. Why? They have other things and other agendas on their minds. They have

to worry about their business or their farms or any number of other earthly cares. Now who in their right mind wouldn't clear space in their schedule to attend a royal banquet? It is absurd, yet people do it all the time. Their own life's agendas draw them away from God's joyous feast.

It seems silly, but here is what is really going on. They wanted to be the source of their own joy. If business was good, if the farm crops were successful they would be happy. And they believed that by their own efforts they could make things good. Now any Buffalo Bills fan can tell you that it is not wise to invest your joy and happiness in something earthly. What happened last Sunday? The Bills, off to their best start in years were leading the game. It was amazing and considering the team who was making a habit of come-from-behind victories this one looked like it was in the bag at halftime. But if you rooted your joy in the performance of the Bills you felt your joy wane into apprehension and then into fear and then into depression as they lost a game they should have won.

It is very tempting to put joy in the things we can control, but it is not wise. Sure, you can't begin to control

how the Bills perform, and you really have little other absolute control over other earthly things either. Best to not put your joy in them. Paul wrote to the Philippians in our second reading that they should rejoice in the Lord. He also said, "...the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." He also wrote, "...the God of peace will be with you." All of these things point to having God be the source of joy, not something earthly.

Of course this joy is not some superficial surface feeling. The joy of a Christian is not to wear a silly happy face at all times and in all situations. It is a deep experience, even deeper than emotions, of the lasting joy that comes from being in relationship with God. It is living that God's promises are secure and that eternal life is certain; and undeserved.

I think that's what's wrong with the guy in the parable who gets chucked out because he isn't wearing a wedding robe. Now this parable is playing on the ridiculous and it is ridiculous to expect someone just invited off the street to be in proper attire for a wedding banquet. It seems absurd to throw him out because he isn't wearing the proper clothes. But of course the

wedding robe is just a symbol for something else. It seems safe to say the lack of a wedding robe is a symbol for someone who plans to exploit God's goodness. This is the person who thinks, "This is a pretty sweet deal. I'll just stuff my pockets at the host's expense and live like a big fat cat." Or maybe to say it differently, "If I'm saved by grace and not works then I'm not going to do anything." But God is not mocked. And God doesn't reach out to you with his gracious love for you to exploit it or become arrogant. God loves you so that love may inspire you to the true joy.

Not only were the religious leaders of Jesus' day worried about their own affairs as the parable hints, they were scandalized by the type of people God was willing to invite to the banquet. They thought only prim and proper people should come. Only people who knew the rules of etiquette should be invited. Only the good and the kind and the nice should be accepted by God they thought.

But in the parable the king says to go out and invited everyone - both good and bad - to the banquet. The religious leaders certainly didn't like the sort of person Jesus was

willing to invite into his company. Jesus reached out to the educated sophisticates of his day and the sinners, tax collectors and lowlifes. He was equally willing to enjoy high tea with a fine old lady or to sit in a sports bar and have fun with the guys watching the game.

I think that's very important for us to remember as we seek to share the joy of our Lord with those people around us. Too often the church is described as judgmental and hypocritical. Those criticisms come with good cause, because Christians are too often that way. Without intending to, Christians can portray God just like the religious leaders of Jesus day; insisting that God would indeed like a fine dinner with society's pure and holy, but not be willing to sit and laugh it up with the guys in a cheap barroom.

But of course Jesus did just that sort of thing. He was called a friend of sinners. The elite of society didn't have a problem with him spending time with sinners. They had problems with him having fun with sinners.

We are wise to not insist that our witnessing to God's joyous goodness take on a holier than thou angle. And we can't let our worship services become solemn assemblies where nothing fun ever happens either. If you're not having fun when you come to church on a Sunday morning something has gone drastically wrong. Worship should be fun and relaxed, not formal. It wouldn't hurt to have balloons or a clown from time to time. I often think coffee hour after worship is every bit as important as worship itself where we all sit here in well-organized rows and follow a script for worship.

I hope and pray that the faith God is inspiring in you is bringing you hope and trueness of joy. Have fun with faith. Have fun with worship. Have fun with prayer. God rejoices to know you and to have you. Rejoice in turn so that your joy may be seen by others. Amen