

“Celebrate!”

(second in a series of messages on ‘Living a God-shaped Life: A Disciple’s Disciplines’)

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Ecclesiastes 5:18-20, John 2:1-11, 15:11, Philippians 4:4-8

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

¹⁸ Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. ²⁰ He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

¹

John 2

Jesus Changes Water to Wine

2 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, ² and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, “They have no more wine.”

⁴ “Dear woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My time has not yet come.”

⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

⁶ Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

⁷ Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

⁸ Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, ⁹ and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰ and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

¹¹ This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. ²

15:11 “These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full...”

Philippians 4:4-8

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ³

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ec 5:18–Ec 6). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Jn 2:1–11). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Php 4:4–8). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

About a month ago, or so, you may have seen an article in the *Seattle Times* about a couple of local churches holding Seahawks football playoff game tailgating parties. The article was entitled:

Seahawks have more than a prayer on Sunday

Two churches in the Seattle region are hosting tailgate parties to celebrate God — and the Seahawks.

By Sonia Krishnan

Seattle Times staff reporter

Ryan Meeks wants to explore a question: Why *shouldn't* Christians be considered world-class partyers?

The 32-year-old will be talking about this on Sunday at Eastlake Community Church in Bothell.

Where he is the pastor.

Where 4,000 congregants will be tailgating during his sermon.

Where, as the Seahawks try to fight their way through another round of the NFL playoffs, there will be no mention of sin or guilt or immorality for indulging in that ultimate American pastime — rooting for one's hometown team.

Trust that it will all be done with plenty of pulled pork, beer, big-screen TVs and trucks, Meeks said. He's even bringing in his old Volkswagen bus. Kids are also welcome to run free in the church's big warehouse space.

"The church is the last place in the world where you'd expect to find people happy or excited or partying," Meeks said. "But why do we have to be so separate from what's happening in our culture? You should celebrate when cool things happen in your community."

And Meeks' church just happens to be where quarterback Matt Hasselbeck and a few other Seahawks attend Sunday services.

For North Sound Church in Edmonds, tailgating also seemed the perfect solution to bring God and his football followers together.

Kickoff is at 10 a.m. That posed a conflict.

So earlier this week, Pastor Barry Crane and the church's worship pastor started kicking around ideas about what to do.

Their solution? Have one service at 8:30 a.m. instead of three throughout the morning, and throw a party/sermon/killer breakfast at the conference center across the street. Prepare enough food for 300 people.

Open it to everyone. And voilà: A tailgate church service was born.

ADVERTISING

Attendees, by the way, are urged to wear Seahawks colors.

So do Meeks and Crane think God will have a hand in the game's outcome?

"I would love to see the Bears get thrashed," Meeks said, laughing. "But to thank God if we beat another team?"

That might be a stretch of theology."

Crane got straight to the point.

"I don't think this is something God is too concerned about," he said.

Then he added quickly: "We're pulling for the Seahawks, of course."

Honestly, when I first read this, I thought it was a bit tacky and over-the-top. I am a sports fan, but to think they would cancel a worship service or two so that they could hold a giant tailgating party complete with plenty of beer seemed a bit much. It seemed like a church trying too hard to be "relevant." By all reports everyone had a good time — 1500 people showed up at Eastlake. I do know the pastor was surprised and a bit embarrassed by all the publicity.

However, I've got to say, once I got beyond my initial reaction and thought about it, I can sympathize with the basic point that these pastors were trying to make.

There is, indeed, a sense in which Christians should be, in Pastor Meek's words, "world-class party-ers." Of course, we are not talking about drunken orgies here! But, we, of all people, should know how to celebrate the good things in life and enjoy them as the good gifts of God. We should radiate joy.

And yet, as Meeks laments, the church is the last place people in our culture would associate with joy, or excitement, or happiness or just plain fun.

One of the worst advertisements for Christianity is joyless Christians and joyless churches. Somber, long faces who look bored out of their minds do not make for a good first impression for people who visit a worship service. I remember it was the famous writer Robert Louis Stevenson who visited church one Sunday, and who registered his surprise in his diary, *"Been to church this morning, and I'm not depressed!"*

We preachers often don't help matters; we have a way of taking the incredible good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, and make it seem boring and old hat. I remember a professor in seminary complaining, *"You preachers can add more black crepe on good news than anyone I have ever seen..."*

It is not an accident that Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding -an occasion of great joy. We would all agree the first impressions are important, and the first impression we have of Jesus is of someone who enjoys a good party and is involved in the affairs of ordinary people. He celebrates with the community. In fact, he saved the party and spared the hosts from the socially embarrassing predicament of running out of wine.

How different Jesus was from John the Baptist, who was severe and pleasure denying - who wouldn't be caught dead at a wedding. There were some who complained that Jesus did not fast like John and falsely accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. There is no doubt that Jesus could join in at a party - he enjoyed being with others, and others liked to be with him.

Really, the keynote of Jesus' whole ministry was joy. No words were more frequently on his lips than *"Be of good cheer," "I came to bring life and life abundant," "Blessed are you...happy are you!" "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full..."*

Our Lord did not come to rob us of our laughter and cheat us of our joy by telling us only what we can't do. He radiated joy and brightened the lives of all who were around him; he certainly brightened that party in Cana.

"Joy is the serious business of heaven," wrote CS Lewis. It is what heaven is all about. Joy is at the very heart of the character of God. In fact, as I tried to emphasize in a sermon on joy at Christmas time, God is the most joyous being in the universe – do you and I really believe that? And God wants to share that his joy with his creatures. He has created this beautiful world for our enjoyment and pleasure.

The Old Testament takes a very positive view of sensual, earthly pleasure. Even the writer of Ecclesiastes, who is often down in the mouth about life, says it is proper and good to enjoy food and drink, and to delight in one's work and in one's wealth and possessions, recognizing that all these things are given to us by God, making us glad of heart.

God commands his people to celebrate feast days, where they are to gather to eat and drink and sing and dance and tell stories of all that God has done. Passover is such a feast. I think of some great party-ers in the Old Testament, who pulled out all the stops to celebrate the goodness of God – I think of Miriam who played the tambourine and danced with joy because of the Lord's victory over pharaoh

at the Red sea. I think of David who danced before the ark of the covenant of God, at the head of a procession upon entering Jerusalem. God wants us to celebrate life and all good gifts. Go ahead, throw a party! God says to us: “enjoy!”

God invented pleasure; it was God’s idea – not the Devil’s. All indeed is for us to enjoy. The only caveat – hear me – is that you and I must always keep in mind that any gift of God can be abused. Sex, drink, food, possessions, wealth – all good things in themselves - can be misused, if they are worshipped or practiced in ways contrary to what God intended.

Now, if you and I are aware that God is the most joyous being in the universe, and if we want to live close to him and live a God-shaped life, then you and I would do well to practice the spiritual discipline of celebration. You may not have thought of celebration as a discipline, but it is something that we have to work at. Dallas Willard, who has written much on the spiritual disciplines defines the discipline of celebration this way: *“it is to enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. [It is to] concentrate on everything being God’s gift to us...”* I think that last phrase is key... it is receiving all good things as a gift from God. Truly joyful people thank God a lot! That kind of attitude has to be cultivated.

It is more important than ever to practice this kind of joy and gratitude, because there so many forces at work in the world today that would rob us of it, and would lead us into a state of sadness, despair and even depression. And that would make us no different than so many around us.

Let me offer some suggestions for practicing the discipline of celebration:

First, let us receive every day as a gift and never take our life for granted.

The older I get, the more thankful I am for another day. As the psalmist put it, *“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* I don’t want to be so preoccupied about the past (which I can’t change), or so preoccupied with the future (which I can’t control) that I fail to enjoy *this* day and live fully in the present moment. I am not sure young people, who think they are going to live forever really get this, but knowing that one’s life span is getting shorter makes every day all the more precious. We may have our problems, but at least we are alive. Every day upon waking up, I am ever more thankful to God for the gift of a brand new day and I am more intentionally resolved to make the best use of it

Receive every day as a gift and never take your life for granted. Thank God upon rising from bed in the morning and thank God upon retiring at night, and praise him through the day. The fact that you and I are alive at all is cause for celebration! And all is miracle around us!

Secondly, to practice the discipline of celebration is to seek out and hang around positive, joy-filled people. Joy is contagious; joy begets joy. Positive vibes freely flow among people who truly enjoy life. On the other hand, nothing kills our joy faster than allowing oneself to be constantly surrounded by negative-thinking, critical, ungrateful clods. They suck the positive energy right out of us. To be sure, we

have to love them as we can, (sometimes we can't escape them), but we have to be very careful not to allow them to shape us.

There is a story of a farmer who had a neighbor, a constant complainer, a wet blanket in the linen closet of life. The farmer decided to impress this man for once in his existence, so he bought the world's greatest hunting dog, trained it thoroughly, and invited his joyless friend to go hunting. He showed the neighbor how his dog could stand motionless for an hour and pick up a scent a mile away. No response. From the blind the farmer shot a duck, which landed in the middle of the pond. Upon command, the dog trotted out, *walked on the surface of the water*, retrieved the bird, and dropped him at the feet of his master. "What do you think of that?" the farmer challenged his neighbor. To which his friend replied, "your dog can't swim, can he?"ⁱ

We all know people like that – people who pour cold water on everything. Honestly, the less time we spend with them, the better.

Hang out with positive – joy-filled people, and your own joy will increase.

And third, it follows that we, ourselves, should be people who go out of our way – who intentionally seek to look for the good and the positive and the beautiful in every situation. I have always hung on to these words of the Apostle Paul as a kind of *modus operandi* for life: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." No matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves, there is always something for us to celebrate.

I think of the Apostle Paul who was sitting in some dark, dank dungeon cell as he wrote a letter of encouragement to the Philippians:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul chose to focus on the presence of Christ, not his circumstances, and he himself could rejoice and find peace in spite of his chains. It was an intentional act on his part to dwell on what was true and good and beautiful. And his mind and heart naturally fastened on Christ.

John Ortberg, pastor of the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, has written a helpful book entitled, [The Life You Have Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People](#). I will be referring from this book the next few weeks, as I am using it as a basis for this series of messages. I would like to share a story he tells about a woman named Mabel. This story came to Ortberg from a friend, Tom Schmidt, who knew Mabel personally and who would visit her.ⁱⁱ

As Tom tells it, Mabel was eighty-nine years old living in a state run, understaffed convalescent hospital and had been there for twenty-five years. "Her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was

almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to one side, dropped one eye, and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the center of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth."

Tom took a flower to her for Mother's Day and Mabel graciously accepted but couldn't see it so she wanted to give it to someone else. *"Mabel held out the flower and said, 'Here, this is from Jesus.'"*

Tom visited her once or twice a week for three years. He would read the Bible to her and she would continue to recite the passage word-for-word from memory. They sang hymns and she talked about how much certain lyrics meant to her. *"I never heard her speak of loneliness or pain except in the stress she placed on certain lines in certain hymns."*

Tom got busy with exams, etc. and all the stuff that was on his mind when he began to wonder what Mabel thought about. *"So I went to her and asked, 'Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?'"* *"And she said, 'I think about my Jesus. I think about how good he's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know...I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied....Lots of folk wouldn't care much for what I think. Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus. He's all the world to me.'" Then Mabel sang the words to the hymn:*

*Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all.
He is my strength from day to day.
Without him I would fall.
When I am sad, to him I go.
No other one can cheer me so.
When I am sad He makes me glad.
He's my friend.*

There is a person, who, despite her terrible circumstances, practiced the discipline of celebration. She chose to celebrate whatever was true and good and beautiful in her life, and she couldn't think of anything or anyone more true and good and beautiful than her friend Jesus and his goodness to her. What a witness. She radiated joy!

If you stop and think about it (and we do need to do that), we Christians have a lot to be joyful about:

- We have the joy of Easter; the joy of living in the presence of the Risen Christ.
- We have the joy of knowing that he conquered sin and death once and for all, and that we shall live with him forever.
- We have the joy of knowing that because of Christ our life has meaning and all our deeds have eternal significance.
- We have the joy of knowing we have access to a power within us that enables us to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think!

- We have the joy of knowing that God will work all things together for good to those who love him, in spite of all our problems and difficulties, for Jesus promises never to leave us or forsake us.

Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century American theologian and pastor, believed that joy was a dead giveaway that God was present in someone's life.

Do you and I given any evidence of joy?

ⁱ As told by John Ortberg, "The Life You Have Always Wanted," Chapter 3, Kindle ed.

ⁱⁱ Orberg, chapter 1.