

Dance to the Music

3rd Sunday after the Epiphany – January 20/21, 2007

Sermon Background Study

Nehemiah 8:9-12 (NRSV)

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” ¹²And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

John 15:9-11 (NRSV)

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Philippians 4:4-5 (The Message)

⁴⁻⁵Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

Do you celebrate life – every day, every minute? Do you celebrate God? Do you experience the joy of being God’s? Do you experience the pleasure of Christian fellowship? It takes practice!

Whenever I hear the phrase “spiritual disciplines” it sounds to me a bit like “eat your vegetables.” You know it’s good for you, but still, ugh. Aren’t spiritual disciplines for monks and other deeply spiritual people who can devote hours to prayer, meditation, and fasting?

I have trouble finding an untouched fifteen minutes, much less hours. I’ve sincerely tried fasting and only gotten hungry. I’ve tried meditating (at least I think that is what I was doing) and only gotten sleepy. Somehow, I’ve been going about this the wrong way.

I think part of my problem has been that I’ve actually been taking an “eat your vegetables” approach to the spiritual disciplines, trying to figure out a way to make myself do something that assume I don’t want to do. It is time for a fresh start.

A fresh start

John Ortberg¹ defines a spiritual discipline as “any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.” Any activity? Any?! Like what? Prayer and Bible reading, sure. Fasting and meditation, ok. But what else could help me to live life as Jesus modeled it?

How about resting? It is a little hard for me to be Christlike on six hours sleep. What about those random acts of kindness? Listening better? Putting personal relationships ahead of productivity? Slowing down? As I look over various lists of the “spiritual disciplines,” I find all those and more. But there is one discipline that surprises me – the discipline of celebration.

Dallas Willard writes that becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus begins in learning to delight in our heavenly Father. Without that joy, we will be forever hamstrung in our efforts to live as Jesus taught, as God desires us to live. Simply put, without joy we will never find the lives we’ve always wanted. Happiness depends on our circumstances, but joy transcends them. “Grouchy Christian” ought to be an oxymoron. As I like back over my life at the Christians who most modeled Jesus for me, without exception every one always had a smile and a warm touch and a kind word. They lived the joy that they experienced in God. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

But can we learn to be joyful? Is joyfulness an activity that we can practice? Can we practice celebration?

¹Ortberg’s book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, is the basis of this sermon series. Copies are available in the St. Andrew bookstore. I highly recommend it.

Practicing celebration

John Ortberg suggests several ways we can practice celebrating² and delighting in God:

1. Start today – each day is God’s day. Too often, we say to ourselves that we could be joyful or happy or content when we get the next promotion or get married or have kids or . . . whatever. But then, today is lost and tomorrow is lost. Before we realize it, we’ve lost months and years. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, celebrate God *today*.
2. Does your presence make others happy? It should. If not, spend more time around joyful people. You know a few people who seem joyful every time you see them. I can name a bunch here at St. Andrew. Spend time with them. Talk with them about their own joy. Ortberg suggests you might even ask one of them to be your “joy coach.” The truth is that joyfulness does not come as easily to some of us as to others.
3. Fill one day a week with pleasant things and activities. Let those good pleasures cultivate gratitude in your heart. Joy will grow from that gratitude.
4. Here’s one from Ortberg we’ve heard before. Unplug the TV for a week. Spend the time in play, in conversation. Cultivate intimacy with your loved ones. Just unplug.

You can think of other joy-giving practices. The key is to see that we have to train ourselves to see the world, our lives, and one another as God sees us, to see more than all the pain and struggle that can overwhelm us. I just found out that I’m to be a grandfather. I can’t even begin to express the joy that washed over me when I found out. The discipline of celebration is about learning how such joy can be a part of my life every day, not just on those “big” days. I want more of what I had when my son and his wife called us with the news. And God wants it for me.

Celebrating worship

We will never learn to celebrate life, if we don’t learn to celebrate God and that is what we mean by *worship*. Worship is about more than majesty and greatness, it is also about beauty and truth and goodness and gratitude and delight. And worship is about more than the hour or so we devote each week to a service of worship. It is about more than a worship service, but it is certainly not about less than that.

Having struggled over the years to move forward in my own discipleship, I can assure you of this. You will never find the life you seek so long as worship attendance is an option. Some weeks I have a wonderful, uplifting, and encouraging experience in worship. Other weeks, I don’t. But what I think I might be getting out of it is not really the point. It is only by being there that I can move forward. There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church and the essence of the church is the worship of our Lord and God.

Today’s passage from Nehemiah drives this point home. Exiles have returned to Jerusalem and the city wall has been rebuilt. Now the people summon Ezra, a scribe, to the public square. They ask him to read to them the book of God’s Law. In other words, they have gathered to worship. He reads to the gathered throng from early morning until midday. The people stand there, listening and then weeping. They weep because they know just how far short they have fallen of God’s hope for them. God had saved them and they had forgotten.

But Nehemiah and Ezra tell the people not to weep. Instead, the people are to celebrate their God and his law. They are to eat the best portions of the meat. They are to drink sweet wine and send meals to those who had none. Instead of mourning over their failures and struggles, the people are to “make great rejoicing, because they understand the words that were declared to them” (v. 12).

When we gather for worship, we too come to celebrate God. How could we possibly hope to become more Christlike so long as we think worship attendance is optional, something we’ll do so long as it is convenient and we are in the mood. Since (1) it is the time of year for resolutions and (2) we know we have to train for the lives we seek, let’s resolve to attend a worship service every week. If you’re out of town, get to a service out of town. If you are in town, come and worship at St. Andrew. Come and embrace our fellowship with Jesus Christ and one another.

²I better explain the title of this study. Not everyone is a child of the 60’s, but those who are, probably remember the Three Dog Night single that went, “Celebrate, Celebrate . . . dance to the music.”

Reading With Heart & Mind

January 21 ~ 27

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Genesis 32:22-32 While Jacob tries to sleep before confronting the feared Esau, he wrestles with God! What is your reaction to this strange story? What's the point?</p>	<p>Monday Genesis 33:1-17 Jacob and Esau meet. What surprises you most about this reconciliation? Do you think it will be lasting?</p>
<p>Tuesday Genesis 34 This is the story of Dinah's rape and its aftermath. What are we to make of this story? What does it reveal to us about Abraham's family? What most surprises you in this story?</p>	<p>Wednesday Genesis 37 This chapter begins the long narrative about Joseph. Here, he dreams of greatness but is sold into slavery by his brothers. As you read these stories, ask yourself what they reveal about God and about Israel.</p>
<p>Thursday Genesis 41:37-57 Joseph rises to power. How do we account for this remarkable ascension? How will Joseph use his power?</p>	<p>Friday Genesis 45 In a very touching scene, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.</p>
<p>Saturday Genesis 49:29 – 50:26 The story concludes with tears and forgiveness. Abraham's family, the people of God, are in Egypt and there they will stay. The book of Exodus opens centuries later with the people enslaved by the pharaoh.</p>	

