



Worship Series: Thanksgiving—A Christian Way of Life

“The Joy of God’s Realm”

Preaching Text: Isaiah 65:17-25

17 November 2013

26th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC, Arlington, Texas 76011

The lesson, Isaiah 65:17-25, is words of promise to a specific group of people. Earlier in Isaiah 65:1-16 the prophet distinguishes between “a rebellious people” (v. 2) and “my servants” (v. 9). Thus God’s subsequent promise extends to obedient servants. Perhaps this signifies authentic stewardship—obedience to God’s gifts loaned to build up God’s realm.

The steward’s reward, as the reward for Isaiah’s obedient and returned exiles, is to live in God’s new creation. As God is about to “create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight,” the people’s response is pure joy. In the end God’s servants/stewards experience joy and thus become stewards of joy. This joy is a blessing of eschatological or “ultimate human destiny” consequence. To be sure, from the beginning of the gospel story, Matthew writes of the Magi: “When they saw that the star had stopped [over Jesus’ birthplace], they were overwhelmed with joy” (Matthew 2:10).

From beginning to end of the gospel narratives, a blessing of faith is unrestrained joy. Joy is a gift from on high. Jesus tells his disciples, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). The writer of 1 John confesses, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1:4). Even Paul expresses his gift of joy by writing: “Yes, you are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2:20)!

Yet, as often as Christians appeal to joy, we also know the reality that little in church life reflects the joy we trumpet. Those things Isaiah invokes as passing away—death, plunder, vain labor—remain today. We seem to have misplaced our joy. Hear now our lesson from Isaiah 65:17-25:



17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

23 They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. 24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD (Isaiah 65:17-25).

Today's lesson from Isaiah reminds stewards of God's promise to obedient stewards/believers. Recognition is always a first step in learning to be a steward. Thus, Christians recognize that God owns everything because God is the creator. To live in that knowledge is to live a life of joy.

In John 9 we read about Jesus healing a man born blind. The long (41 verses) and superb narrative has numerous twists and turns. After his healing, told in spare detail (vss. 6-7), everyone he encounters cross-examines him. Jesus has healed him of a lifelong infirmity, yet what the story's characters want from him is the gory details: When? How? Why? Who . . . and so forth? John's story of the healed man born blind elicits not one ounce of joy from those who should be jumping with delight for the good fortune of the man who gained his sight. No one—not neighbors, not parents, or religious authorities—offer congratulations. Is this a story of the current church? Do we rejoice when we can?

Recently I re-read a small book entitled *Clowning in Rome* by Henri Nouwen. The book's controlling image for the Christian life were the clowns that Nouwen come across in Rome. Nouwen likened the clowns to how Christians are to be in the world.



Plainly the clowns did not take themselves too seriously, yet they offered themselves to all who watched as reminders of life's joy and mirth. Perhaps all of us can be stewards of the joy God offers us as reminders of life's gift and blessedness.

My family has a beautiful quilt, a gift from a dear church. Stitched into it is each church member's name. These names steadily remind me of my joy in serving that congregation. Could we imagine that God looks at our names stitched into the heavens? We are stewards and manage God's resources because we express the joy of our salvation. Stewards derive joy from being part of God's Realm.

We all know people who have made life-changing decisions. I am suggesting those people who out of some kind of desperation or another prayed, "Lord, if you will help me be successful, then I will be faithful with everything you give me." Some even say: "I will begin to tithe." Our Genesis friend Jacob was like this. Jacob had a comparable life-changing experience one day at Bethel and prayed a similar prayer: "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, [then] I will surely give one-tenth to you" (paraphrase of Genesis 28:20-22).

Next Sunday we will have a chance to make a parallel pledge to support our church. As you spiritually prepare for that day, I hope our experience will be about more than simply supporting the church. I hope we approach it as an act of faithful response to God. That is what stewardship is. It is not waiting to see what God gives us to decide to be faithful. It is vowing on the front end, "God, I choose now to be faithful and generous with all you give."

A few years back, *Leadership* magazine told a story about a Mike Herman. He had been going to professional baseball games and trying to get a souvenir ball as far back as he could remember. Since he was a boy he had gone to games hoping to catch a foul, a homer, or even just a batting practice ball. Anything would do—he just wanted a professional baseball.

One day he attended a Cardinals' game. He arrived early for batting practice



and was watching Mark McGuire and his teammates warm-up. Soon he became aware of a five year-old-boy named James. James had his glove, obviously also hoping to catch a ball. He stood near the fence to pronounce the players' names as they walked past. "Hello Mr. Timwin (Timlin), can I have a ball please?"

Mike sat with James telling him each player's name, and they would smile at James . . . but tossed him no ball. Mike said, "Before I knew it, it became my mission to get a ball for James I told him he could have my ball if I caught one. I had been unsuccessful for twenty-eight years, so I didn't feel I was promising much."

Mike went on, "I wouldn't be telling this story if you didn't know what happened five minutes later. I caught a ball, and yes, I gave it to James."

Then Mike Herman completed the thought: "I wonder how often God waits to give us something until we are willing to give it away" (From Rob Fuquay, St. Luke's UMC, Indianapolis, IN: 18 October 2013)?

I wonder . . . ?

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