

WHAT JOY THERE IS IN SERVING!

Psalm 118:21-29, John 15:8-11

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Last year my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary, alerted me to the fact that my graduating class's fiftieth anniversary reunion was approaching. Accompanying the reminder was an intriguing personal question addressed to each of us in the class, the answer to which we were invited to share with our classmates. This was the question: "How has your theology, your understanding of God, changed in the past fifty years?" How would you answer that? How has your theology changed during your journey through life? What has the Spirit of God been up to in your life during these past decades, years, recent weeks?" Something to ponder!

I replied by reporting my joyful discovery about fifteen years ago of Celtic Christianity, a tradition that for largely political reasons was pushed to the sidelines way back in the Dark Ages, but was quietly maintained for centuries in small Irish and Scottish communities. The Celtic Christian tradition has recently gained positive attention nurtured by leaders like Joh Philip Newell, who has agreed to be the Smyth lecturer right here next October.

The tradition we have inherited – Western, Roman, Mediterranean Christianity – has been largely male and clerically dominated. But Celtic Christianity from the very beginning has been led by women and men alike, by laypersons and clergy alike. And theologically, Celtic spiritual faith has emphasized two foundational Biblical claims. The Roman tradition divided creation into sacred and secular realms with disastrous consequences – and we would need more than another sermon to unpack that, but witness what we have done to our planet in the name of "secular" progress. The Celts, on the other hand, insisted that all of creation shows us the goodness of God. The psalmist sings, "let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice, let the sea roar, let the fields exult, let all the trees of the forest sing for joy..." Sing Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee. We adore thee! That's praise! That's passion! That's worship offered to our God who declares of creation – all of it! – "this is good!"

The other Biblical claim essential in Celtic faith is that all of us have been made in God's image. Celtic faith utterly reject the pernicious doctrine of original sin. There is only original blessing! God's image is at the deepest level of our being. It is what is most fundamental about our identity, our humanity. Do you believe that? About yourself? About your neighbor? Take a moment right now and look at your fellow worshippers. Look into each other's eyes, windows to their souls. Can you allow yourself to see God's image in your neighbors? Now imagine neighbors who are outside your worshipping community, people you know who are like you, and others who are not like you, neighbors near and far whose politics, race, sexual orientation, nationality, legal status, religion, socioeconomic condition, educational level you don't share. Can you see God's image in them? Another question. Can you allow yourself to imagine serving them? Welcoming them into your life, befriending them? One final question – if your

neighbor bears the image of God, when you serve your neighbor can you imagine that you are serving God, adoring God, realizing the deep satisfaction and joy that comes in loving God?

You cannot get joy by going after it. Joy does not come in the front door. Joy slips in the backdoor, indirectly, when you are doing something for someone else. As Jesus said, you discover life most fully, most joyfully, by giving it away. You are richest when you spend yourself for others. I am moved by a verse from the 12th chapter of Hebrews – “for the joy that was in him, Jesus endured the cross.” Wow! It seems that joy and serving go together.

Many centuries ago our ancestors captured and remembered the words of a prayer ecstatically sung by a psalmist. “Lord, you have become my salvation!” The psalmist is saved! From what? For what? We don’t know the details. But what matters is the salvation! “This is the day the Lord has made!”, the psalmist goes on to shout a beatitude. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”. The psalmist has realized something. Think about it. Someone has come prompting the psalmist’s awareness of his or her salvation. O, the psalmist is blessed, for sure. But that *someone* is also blessed, for it is blessing indeed to be one who comes in the name of the Lord to bring. Blessing. It is all about the joy of serving.

Jesus challenged his disciples to bear fruit. “I am the vine, and you are the branches”, he said. Be connected with me so that you will be healthy and productively bearing fruit. Sharing God’s love by serving. He went on. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” What joy serving brings!

Have you adults ever asked a child, “What would you like to be when you grow up?” I’d like to suggest a different question. “How would you like to be when you grow up?? Not “what would you like to do?”, but “how would you like to do whatever you’d like to do?” When the recently graduated University of Minnesota Medical School students began their studies several years ago they decided as a class to create an oath to guide their journey toward their vocation, and they maintained it all the way to graduation. It included those words: “We will cure sometimes, we will treat often, we will comfort always.”

Serving seems to be in the DNA of the millennial generation and their younger brothers and sisters. Don’ ask young people today to volunteer to fill slots in an institution’s organizational chart. They aren’t interested. But ask them to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty and they are ready to go. Marti and I see it each year in VA Tech’s Big Event. Upwards of 10,000 VA Tech students fanning out all over our region as volunteers to rake leaves, paint, do household chores, yard work, and window washing for local residents. Back in the spring six students came to us and spread two truckloads of mulch for us, and they had a ball doing it. I love VA Tech’s motto, *ut prosum*, “that I may serve”, Tech’s stated purpose for a college education. How wonderful! A presenter for a lifelong Learning Institute class I recently took noted that she had joined the Tech faculty because of Tech’s focus on service.

I am confident that what I am about to assert is true. If you were to look back over this congregation's history, I bet you would agree that the most delightful moments, the most joyful occasions, the most laughter-filled experiences, the most satisfying realizations, the most thrilling outcomes, have flowed out of service. Time when you blessed folks who needed you beyond these walls in the larger community and across the world, and within these walls to one another. When you offered hospitality to a stranger, food to a hungry person, support to someone who was grieving, lodging for a homeless man, tuition to an African nursing student, friendship to a small child, an open mind to someone with whom you disagreed, a song to lift someone up...those were times of joy. You were blessed, for blessed are those who come in the name of the Lord. Blessed are those who demonstrate out Lord's justice, compassion, welcome.

Some demonstrations are quiet affairs, like these signs springing up on lawns in our region, in multiple languages, English, Arabic, and Spanish... "No matter where you're from we are glad you're our neighbor". Other demonstrations are more public, and need to be. During the election campaign last year at the height of the rhetoric about border security there was a communion service at a place called Anapra Crossing on the Mexico-New Mexico border. Under the watchful eyes of the U. S. Border Patrol families and loved ones, friends and strangers came together to touch one another through the links in the fence separating them, sharing bread and wine, remembering Jesus, serving one another with joy.

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." As Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday the crowd sang the beatitude, echoing the psalmist of old. Jesus was blessed. He was beginning the most profound week of serving our world has ever known. Even as denial and betrayal and crucifixion approached there was joy deep in his heart, coming to the surface on Maundy Thursday night when he washed his disciples' feet. It was an example for you that you also should do. When you do such things you will be blessed!" Thanks be to God!

PRAYER: How wonderful it is, O God, to discover that joy comes to us when we serve. For such moments of discovery we offer you our thanksgiving and praise. Amen.