

Sunday October 9, 2011 10:30 AM

“Created For Joy”

Isaiah 25:1-9

St. Matthew 22:1-14

St. Matthew 22:2

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

It does take a certain audacity, considering the last month or so, to allow a song like “Rain Down” to be sung here. We are clearly living dangerously . . . as we usually do.

And yet, there is a greater truth at work here than mere precipitation, for it is raining down upon us, as a congregation, today.

We have come through the weather damage, and although we have work yet to come, the support and encouragement and commitment have rained down upon us and brought us joy.

And today we mark the 70th wedding anniversary of John and Lena Fenwick and their steadfast devotion to each other has rained blessings down upon generations of their family and friends.

And of course, on a very personal level, I can’t even begin to measure, much less describe, the downpour of blessings that were mine just a few minutes ago, I never thought, when this long, strange trip – as my friend Jerry would say – began, that I would have a day like this.

So thank you, Choir and Deb, for reminding us of the blessings that God provides and the joys that those blessings bring us.

Blessings and joys, especially in the midst of harsh realities, is the theme of Isaiah's prophecy this morning, and we have known the harsh realities, haven't we? As a congregation we have had a flurry of sorrow recently, a shroud hanging over us, for that is as much a part of life as the joy and laughter, isn't it?

Which brings us, for the second week in row, to what can only be described as another really weird parable from Jesus.

I've always struggled with this parable and some of the fine details of it and how to apply them.

I mean, I've said 'no' to some wedding invitations, but I've never felt like I was going to be attacked, slaughtered and have my city burned around me. That's a tough RSVP! In fact, most wedding hosts and hostesses I know are glad to get a few refusals and save a few dollars and invite some people off of the "B" list!

But I'm going to ask you to not spend a lot of time on those details today. Last week we had the parable of the tenants in the field who had that 3 Stooges scheme to steal the ownership of the vineyard, when the story was really about the owner who had that crazy love that just wouldn't take no for an answer. This week we find – in the exaggerated, middle-eastern story-telling style of Matthew – one central point that cannot be ignored or denied: The Kingdom of Heaven is constructed and founded upon a single premise, that the King wants to, and will, share his love and joy with his people.

That's the heart of this parable: God wants to, and will, share his love and joy with us. That's why we were created.

We were created for joy, both our joy and God's joy, God desires our companionship, our relationship, we were created to both bring and receive the gift of joy, to each other and to God.

Robbie knows that, we're the ones who keep forgetting it, ignoring it or rejecting it, but Robbie and I were talking about it last week at the Pig Roast.

He knows that the very best moments of life are when he has a full belly, a dry bottom and a large room to roll around in.

And he also knows that whatever joy he has is multiplied if he can get someone else, of any age or gender, to get down on the floor with him and just laugh, just share the joy.

And we know that the joy that comes to him so easily now, protected by his parents and his sister and the rest of his family and his church, we know that it will grow harder and harder, to keep that joy, to sustain it, to strengthen it. We know that the world out there will work against him and will attempt to just beat it out of him.

We know that because – whether we are honest enough to admit it or not – we know the ways in which the world out there has attempted to beat the joy out of us. And sometimes, the world almost succeeds.

And then he smiles and he laughs and the clouds lift and the joy returns.

And there is much that we can learn from him and the other children, for the old truth remains: "a little child shall lead them."

But only if we let them.

So, for a few minutes, let me ask you to stop being so sinfully serious and consider the three qualities of joy that Robert Connor has been teaching me lately and can remind us of today.

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

As I say, don't get hung up on the details of the parable, save them for another day and another sermon, but understand this: our God, our King invites us to a celebration, a celebration of family, a celebration of love.

I will be involved in three weddings over the next 4 weeks. All three of them are going to have different styles and tones to the wedding as well as the banquet, the reception, styles that reflect the three couples and their lives and dreams.

But they will have this in common: they are being designed to provide the guests with joy!

Just as in the weddings of ancient days, the food, the drink, the music and above all the company, will be provided so that all of the guests will receive joy.

And they will all be successful, for those who allow it, those who will receive the joy!

And as for those who drop it, those who refuse the invitation, those who show up but don't care about receiving the joy? They will never know what they missed, their dry and narrow souls are unable to even realize the joy of God's love.

But Robbie knows about it, he knows how to make the catch.

He knows that he already has everything he needs for joy.

And it isn't tied to what we eat and drink and think we own.

I have seen Robbie's diet, I can assure you, you don't need gourmet food or fine wine to be happy. You don't need great wealth or power or prestige, in fact those very things that we think will make us happy are often the barriers.

An example, one of my favorite TV shows ever was The Sopranos. In part because I'm from North Jersey, I knew these people, Debi went to school with them and I'm related to them. These characters, from Tony on down, had all of the "things" imaginable: castles to live in, cars of luxury, money to burn, power to get whatever they wanted and – within their world – they had prestige and admiration. And yet I have never seen a more unhappy group of people in my life!

In all of the things that really matter in life - healthy relationships, loyal friendships, committed marriages and the ability to live with themselves and their actions and choices – they were the most pitiful and miserable people imaginable! They couldn't trust anyone, ever, because they knew that any moment could be their last, and often was.

Robbie doesn't have that problem.

He is filled with joy because he has what he needs for the banquet.

"The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son."

Which brings us to the second quality of joy that Robbie can teach us. The first is that joy is not based on what you have, and the second is that joy is based upon who you are with.

Robbie knows that someone will make sure that his belly will be filled, his bottom will be dry and he will have a floor to roll on, what more does he need?

He may not know who we all are yet, and he may have some reservations once he finds out, but right now the person who will get down on the floor and laugh with him is the person he want to be with.

Joy takes companionship, solitary joy is as doomed as solitary faith, it is a plant without roots.

We need our communities, our families and circles of friends. Most of the people I know who claim they don't need anyone, they are lonely and sad people. We don't need a lot of people, in fact I would argue that we are not capable of having more than half-a-dozen or so friends, but we need a few of them, people to whom we will entrust our hopes, our fears, our hearts.

We weren't created for loneliness.

Robbie may be a happy kid and a good sleeper – at least when he is in Clover Hill – but once he's awake, he doesn't want to hang out alone in his little sleeping cage thing, he wants to get out and share his smile.

Joy is that magical gift that increases the more you give it away, the only thing that can kill joy is to hoard it, to withhold it, but the more you share joy the more joy you have to share.

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

Joy is not based upon what you have, it is dependant upon who you are with, and finally, Joy is built upon your own attitude toward life.

Robbie didn't teach me that one, but I intend to teach him that one.

I have been told by those who know me well, and love me anyway, that I am inclined to be, perhaps, a bit overly optimistic about life, a wearer of rose-colored glasses.

You know the old argument about half-full and half-empty glasses? I am the guy who presumes that the glass is going to get topped off and soon. And it will be good to drink, whatever it is!

There are people who remind me that positive thinking doesn't always work, and I agree, but I also know, and like to remind them, that negative thinking works one hundred percent of the time.

So I chose to believe in joy as a baseline for my life.

Have I known sadness and tears and disappointments and failures and sorrows? Of course, you know I have, you have lived through them with me. But they are the aberrations, the baseline is joy, my life is lived out not in the dark shrouded life that Isaiah described but, but by the grace of God I choose to live in the world of light where death is no more, tears are wiped aside and the feast of life is ours together.

One writer put it this way:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think, say, or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our attitudes.

Robbie has taught me, as his sister did, as his father and his aunt did, to choose joy and love, forgiveness and laughter, to say “yes” to the invitation to the party that God gives us each day.

“The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.”

To God alone be the Glory, today and forever. Amen
Clover Hill Reformed Church
October 9, 2011