

# 43

## Celebrating the Joy

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”  
(John 15:11)

A young man has spent five years traveling throughout the world making a documentary on native dances. He is nearing the end of his project and winds up in Australia in Alice Springs. He begins to talk to an Aborigine, who asks the researcher if he ever saw the “Butcher Dance.”

“Butcher Dance? What’s that?” he asks.

“What? You never heard of it?”

Well, the Aborigine convinces the fellow that he must see the “Butcher Dance” to finish his project. Once convinced, the man gets excited about being able to experience this very famous dance. They begin their trek over the outback to a place where the Butcher Dance is observed. They follow a dirt track for 200 miles, walking for three days through creeks and valleys. It takes them another four days to get over the mountains. And, of course, all this time they are dragging their camera equipment and crew with them. After seven long days of grueling travel, they finally reach the village of the Butcher Dance. They find the village chief and explain to him why they have traveled so far and say they are anxious to start filming this exotic dance.

Then the bad news hits them. The chief explains that the Butcher Dance Festival was the previous night. The chief adds, “Maybe you can see it the next time.”

“Well, when will you hold the next dance?” the researcher asks.

“Not ‘til next year.”

“Couldn’t you please hold it just one more time tonight so we could see it and film it for our documentary?”

“No,” was the reply. “The Butcher Dance is very holy and is performed only once a year.”

The man is devastated but has no other option than to wait until the next year. So he decides to stay in the area and tries to make a go of it in the village, even though it is very difficult. He becomes ill, cannot find work, misses his family, but alas, he sticks it out.

A year passes and the day of reckoning comes—the next festival of the Butcher Dance. The natives form a circle around a huge roaring fire. A deathly hush descends over the performers and some sort of witch doctor appears and begins the ritual. The researcher is getting caught up in the fervor of the event. “Wow,” he thinks, “here I am, the first white man to see the famous Butcher Dance.” He starts filming. The chief strides to his position in the circle and, in a big booming voice, starts to sing. He says, “You butch yer right arm in. You butch yer right arm out. You butch yer right arm in, and you shake it all about!” (Bimler, pp.118-120).

That story makes me laugh. Laughter is a good thing in life. It reflects joy in the heart. Joy is a good thing. It must be, because there are over 800 passages in the Bible that deal with “joy.” God must like the word. Even more than liking the word in the Bible, God loves it when there is joy in life.

Jesus entered into His public ministry talking about joy. As He began His public ministry, some of His first words were regarding joy. He stood before the people in His hometown and read the words of Isaiah:

*“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).*

Is it only coincidence that the text for His message is tied into the Old Testament celebration of the Year of Jubilee? As He entered ministry with a festal shout, so He prepared to end His days talking about joy: *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11)*. Amazing, when you think about it—on a night when Jesus is faced with deep anguish, He talks about joy.

Martin Luther once said, “God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to the dear God whenever you rejoice or laugh from the bottom of your heart.”

That makes sense to me. When I see my girls laughing, it pleases me so much. Why would it not be true with God when He sees me laugh?

At a time when Jesus shared some difficult teaching (some of it regarding obedience to His command to love as He has loved), He followed it with these words, *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* He does not give us His commands because we are too happy and He wants to make us more serious. He gives us the command to love one another because He believes that we are not joyous enough. There is no one in the entire universe who is happier or more joyous than God! He wants that joy to be in you and me.

The absence of joy from the life of the church and the Christian is a serious hindrance to our witness. Dallas Willard writes:

“How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality within the freedom of God’s loving rule” (p. 80).

Joy in the life of a believer is not only fun; it is a necessity. Take to heart the words of Nehemiah: “. . . *for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10)*.

For all those times I know the joy of the Lord through His body and blood, which I receive at His altar, or through the comforting presence of His Spirit, I ditto what Nehemiah said: “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” In times of trouble, joy gives strength. In times of temptation, joy gives strength. It is the absence of joy that makes us weak.

“Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us” (Willard, p. 181).

It is very basic when we delight in God as our greatest joy. Sinful actions are not as appealing or attractive. There is strength in that joy. Don’t get me wrong. Temptations are still attractive. They are just not *as* attractive. It only follows that where there is a heart of joy, it will seek the opportunity to celebrate.

When the Red Sox recently won the World Series, fans who had waited so long (86 years—but who’s counting?), looked for some way to celebrate the joy with others. Phone calls. E-mails. It was too sweet and too good to keep inside.

God understands this basic need and desire. He knows that our delight in Him needs a chance to express itself in community. This is one of the great joys of worshipping with other Christians. The Old Testament places a lot of emphasis on the feast days.

These days of feasting were to be as influential as were the strict regulations of fasting and sacrifices. The Book of Leviticus has the reputation for being a book of laws and regulations. It has a fair share in its pages. But it also has a lot to say about celebrating among the community of believers.

God is pleased when His people gather to celebrate in His name—celebrating His victories, His faithfulness and grace. This is what rests at the very heart and center of worship—the celebration of God’s goodness and glory. So often we want to make worship about us. We look for hymns that move us in certain ways; messages that help us with “real life” problems; worship time that helps us to experience His presence. I rejoice when this is the result of worship, but these are secondary. First and foremost, our worship celebrates Him. He alone is worthy to receive our praise and honor. This is reflected so well in the hymn of praise, “This is the Feast”:

This is the feast of victory for our God.  
Alleluia.  
Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,  
Whose blood set us free to be people of  
God.  
Power and riches and wisdom and strength  
And honor and blessing and glory are his.

This is the feast of victory for our God.  
Alleleluia.  
Sing with all the people of God,  
And join in the hymn of all creation:  
Blessing and honor and glory and might  
Be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.  
This is the feast of victory for our God,  
For the Lamb who was slain has begun his  
reign.  
Alleluia, alleluia.  
(Lutheran Worship. pp. 182-183)

When worship is carried out in spirit and truth as Jesus taught (John 4:23), all of worship is a feast—a feast on the love and faithfulness of God. The highpoint of this

feast is the celebration of Holy Communion. What a great way to refer to this meal—the *celebration* of Holy Communion. That is precisely what it is—a celebration. God is victorious. He rules. He alone is worthy.

Worship is nothing less than offering Him the praise He deserves in a rhythm that echoes our daily walk with Him.

“Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God.

“Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where his name is, there is he. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words he has used to make himself known to us.

“The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink. Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from his Word and from the way his Word has prompted his worship through the centuries. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in

its own day—the living heritage and something new” (Lutheran Worship, p. 6).

In worship, we are reminded through the hymns that our celebration of joy can sometimes be found in the midst of great pain. Some of the most endearing celebrations of joy have been in the presence of much pain, for the joy is not found in life’s circumstances but in the joy of the Lord.

Horatio Spafford stands witness to this so powerfully. Spafford was born in 1828 and lived much of his life in Chicago as a successful lawyer and businessman. He was deeply religious and active in his church.

Beginning in 1870, a series of tragic events tested his faith greatly. In 1873, a doctor advised the Spaffords to take a vacation for the family’s well being. Hearing that a dear friend, Dwight L. Moody, would be preaching in England, the Spaffords decided to leave for a vacation there. Spafford’s wife and their four daughters set sail, and Horatio would follow after completing some business. On November 22, 1873, while enroute, their ship sunk. Mrs. Spafford survived, but the four daughters were lost. When she arrived in Wales, she cabled her husband with the news: “Saved alone.”

Receiving the news, Spafford left immediately to join his wife. He asked the captain of the ship to notify him when they approached the approximate location of where his daughters’ ship went down. Notified that the area was near, Spafford went down into his cabin and wrote this hymn, which today we know as “When Peace Like A River,” or better known as “It is Well With My Soul”:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”  
It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come,

Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

My sin . . . O, the bliss of this glorious thought,

My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,

The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,  
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend.

“Even so” – it is well with my soul.  
It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

Jesus said,

*“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

What amazes me about this statement is when He said it. He was facing death in the morning. How could He talk about joy?

*“Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame (Hebrews 12:2).*

What is that joy that was before Him? It is obeying the will of His Father. The joy of obedience. Beyond this, it is His joy of knowing that in the anguish of *His* soul, it may be well with *our* souls.

Joy in this life almost always involves an attitude of “No matter what, I will rejoice.”

There is certain defiance, because we know that at the Cross “it is well with my soul.” When faith shall be sight, we know that joy will have the last word.

For the sheer joy of knowing Him and for the joy of life itself, why not then celebrate the joy? “Butch yer right arm in, butch yer right arm out; butch yer right arm in and shake it all about.”

**Prayer:** Jesus, you are the happiest person in the universe. let your joy be my joy this day. no matter what goes on tody, let me say, “It is well with my soul. **Amen.**”

**Challenge:** What about God makes you smile and laugh? Be sure to laugh today and let the joy show to others.

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 96

**From the Book of Concord:** “Alongside this definition, the word ‘gospel’ is used in another (that is, in a strict) sense, when it includes not the proclamation of repentance but only the proclamation of the grace of God, as in the subsequent passage in Mark 1[:15], ‘Repent, and believe in the gospel.’”

“In a similar way the little word ‘repentance’ is not used in just one sense in Holy Scripture. For in certain passages in Holy Scripture it is used and understood as the entire conversion of the person, as in Luke 13[:5], ‘Unless you repent, you will all perish,’ and in Luke 15[:7], ‘There will be joy over one sinner who repents . . .’ But in the passage in Mark 1[:15] and in other places where repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 20[:24]) or ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 24[:47]) are set in contrast, repentance means nothing else than to recognize sin truly, to be heartily sorrowful for it, and to abstain from it. This recognition comes from the law but is not sufficient for a salutary conversion to God, if faith in Christ is not joined to it. The comforting proclamation of the holy gospel offers his merit to all repentant sinners whom the proclamation of the law has terrified. For the gospel proclaims forgiveness of sins not to crude, secure hearts, but to those who have been crushed or are repentant (Luke 4[:18]). So that despair does not develop out of the sorrow or terror of the law, the proclamation of the gospel must be added to it, so that there may be a ‘sorrow that leads to salvation’ (2 Cor. 7[:10])” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V: Law and Gospel, p. 582.6-9).