

Third Sunday after Epiphany; Fr. Rick, homilist

Whenever I hear the word “celebration,” I think of the song by that name by popular 1980s band Kool and the Gang. It also brings to mind a monk I knew when I was in seminary and staying at a Benedictine monastery. I will call him Father Dance, because when this song came on the radio, he threw his arms into the air and began to dance, even when he was wearing his habit! Usually a quiet man who hailed from New England, he was enlivened by this song. I was enlivened by watching him dance with such joy.

All of us are familiar with the story of the fall of Judah, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the 70-year exile of Judeans nearly 600 years before Jesus’ birth. Jewish exiles lived, raised children, grew old, and died in Babylonia. No doubt parents and grandparents shared with their children and grandchildren stories of the magnificence of the temple and the beauty of their homeland. Memories can be enlivening.

Upon the return to Judah, the exile children and grandchildren, now grown and seeing their home for the first time, saw ruins. How disheartening. This was nothing like their visuals from the stories they heard. Prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged them to see beyond the ruins and rebuild the temple. The rebuilding started in 538 BCE, was interrupted, and began again in 521 BCE. It was completed in 515 BCE. No doubt a grand celebration occurred then!

About 450 years before Jesus’ birth, a Persian king had a Jewish cupbearer named Nehemiah. Though the Jerusalem temple had been rebuilt more than a half-century before, the Jewish community had lost much of its spirit. They were defenseless against their non-Jewish neighbors since their walls had not been rebuilt. He asked if he could go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. It was his home. Nehemiah was given leave and, once there, he had the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt.

It was a good morale-lifter for the people of Jerusalem. Something else occurred that not only lifted morale but spiritually enlivened the people. Ezra, a scribe and priest, brought out the Law of Moses and read it to all the people gathered in the square. Not only did he read, but there were those learned in the law who helped the people understand the law according to their circumstances. The reaction of the people, “Amen. Amen.”

A people who are striving to return to their identity as a people of God are reminded of how God has been with them and continues with them. The law is their teacher. Listening to the law proclaimed and having it interpreted for them for the day in which they live – this is a day to celebrate. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the assisting Levites, rallied the people, “Don’t weep! Celebrate! Party, hearty! Eat the fat and drink sweet wine! Know who you are as a people of God and live it! Come on! Celebrate!”

Generally, the elements of the synagogue experience would be the reciting of the ancient prayer *Shema* which begins *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One*; praying while facing Jerusalem; an amen from those gathered; reading from sections of the sacred scrolls; a sermon; and a benediction. It is a celebration of God’s care for God’s people and their love of God. Any male could be asked or offer to pray, read portions of the scripture, or give a sermon.

In the reading we have from Luke, Jesus reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah. His sermon? “This day this reading has been fulfilled in your presence.” Briefest sermon ever! He says this in a community that knows him. They are not happy. These words are meant for the Messiah. Good boy he may have been, but Messiah? No! There are those who want to end him. What he said is too much. He is not their image of a Messiah.

Yet the reading and Jesus’ words are something to celebrate. His mission is to heal and reconcile. Taking a text from the Hebrew Scriptures originally offered as a message of hope to a people battered and broken, Jesus also offers hope to anyone who is marginalized, victimized, and lost. To each, Jesus offers a hand to help them stand and know their dignity before God, and God’s love. He opens a way of seeing their value to God. Hopefully, they will then see their own value. And if they are open to the Spirit, they may see the value of others as God sees their value. This birth of life within is truly something to celebrate.

According to the Book of Acts, Paul founded a Christ community in Corinth – a community that has given him headaches; such fragmentation there. Paul reminds them in the elegance of the reading we heard this morning that they are all part of the body of Christ. He encourages them to understand that all parts of the body need one another. No one is better because of one’s spiritual gifts and no one is less because of having different gifts. What they have is to help the Body of Christ be the continuation of Jesus’ mission to heal and reconcile, being awakened to one’s value and awakening people to their value to God and God’s love of them. Their biggest challenge may be that they have not fully absorbed all this means. If they did, they would celebrate rather than argue.

Each Sunday, we gather to celebrate the love of God as revealed to us through Jesus. This love overcomes any adversity. It invites us to come up higher in the awareness of God’s love. If you notice in your bulletin, the priest who officiates at our Sunday celebration of God’s love is referred to as the presiding-celebrant. In some churches, the priest is referred to as the celebrant. In others, the priest is listed as the presider. In actuality, the priest is both.

We have the priest as presiding-celebrant because this person does lead the worship (presides). This person is not the only one celebrating the liturgy. Everyone who attends the service and participates is a celebrant. At this Sunday celebration of the love of God expressed in Jesus, you are a celebrant! All of us are celebrants! Liturgy means “work of the people.” Our celebrating together is the work of the people. What wonderful work it is! This space made holy by its consecration witnesses holiness in us as we worship together.

Paul encourages the Christ community of St. Matthew Tucson to live in our body parts as part of Christ’s body. I may be a toe, but it’s all beautiful. Jesus asks us to be healing and reconciling agents in a world of fear and hostility, to be his presence. Nehemiah and Ezra encourage us to celebrate the revelation of God’s love and make it part of who we are. It is time to celebrate the love that birthed us all, sustains us all, and walks with us all.

As Fr. Dance would say, hands in the air, and dancing about, “Yahoo, celebration! Yahoo! It’s a celebration!” So come on, gang! Let’s be cool! Amen.