

For the Joy of it All

HarvestFest

I Chronicles 29:10-13, 20-22; II Corinthians 8:1-4

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I remember it as yesterday; we had gathered in a task force to deal with the fact that this place wasn't doing very well financially, and no one has ever accused me of being a good fundraiser. Fun-raiser, yes, but fundraiser, no. Some of the responsible leadership knew that something had to happen. So, we gathered around a table and did some brainstorming and, in the midst of all of that, someone said, "Maybe we should have a party." I jumped on that idea, because, I said, "I think that's one way that I could do stewardship. We should have a party." And we did.

I remember the first service when those balloons floated through the air. Cindy Anderson will tell you that she went to school the next day and the children that were here told the people at school that they had had balloons at church. It was so different from anything we had ever experienced before, but there was such an outpouring of joy, the children were so delighted, and I think perhaps it was because it was such a contrast to our high church liturgy that we simply enjoyed being together in that kind of a party mode around a very good cause.

We had such a good time that year that we even thought for a while that we ought to have four party Sundays a year, and we did that for a while. But, eventually, we came down to having this party Sunday and more lately we have added that harvest dimension and that is where we are today. Already again today just looking into your faces, I am confirmed that that is the way to set forth a serious intention.

Don Hoekstra has already said to you that this is no small undertaking. It would be a piece of cake for a congregation where all of the old techniques were still in place, where we could talk about guilt and heavy responsibility, where I could stand before you and say, "The Lord has led me, and God says and God demands and God requires." I could cast that all in that old framework in which I grew up and was trained and in which I began my ministry. It was serious business, God's business, and on occasion the preacher would say, "The Lord spoke to me, I had a dream last night," or "As I was meditating on this, I was led of the Lord to tell

you," and of course there was always that note of heavy obligation. Sometimes it was laced with a bit of threat and on occasion when the people didn't respond adequately, there was a kind of a scolding tone. Now, if you've been at church all your life as I have, you know what I'm talking about.

For some reason, I never felt comfortable with that, particularly when I came back in 1971 and this place started to break out all over and we had a theme. We were going to build a team to build a program for the healing of people, and very self-consciously we said we're not going to worry about brick and mortar. So, we went from one service to two services, and then from two services to three services. At that time I would tell the people, "The first service is rehearsal, the second service is finesse, the third service fatigue." But, eventually we had to think about building this place.

I was in fear and trembling because we were already stretched to the limit. We were already doing deficit financing and then to think about building something like this? Someone convinced me that if you invested enough, even though you went into debt, eventually you would come to the point where you could pay that off and prosper. I see in the newspaper a church here and congregation there going into programs of two, three, four, five million dollars, and then I know it's time to retire. I get so weary, I couldn't even think of that. If I was half the leader I should be, that courtyard should be covered and we'd be able to flow right out of the sanctuary right into that wonderful courtyard with glass on top. We have a plan for it, by the way. Maybe we should get started!

Seriously, I'm always troubled with the fact that preachers like me can so glibly say, "God obviously is leading us thus and so," because I knew as a preacher that there was a lot of my will and a lot of my ambition tied up with that. It just always bothered me a bit. It was a bit presumptuous for *my* plan and *my* program to be sold as the will of God. That tension I lived with, and consequently never did this kind of thing very well. I'm being serious now, because I did live with that kind of tension. And yet, nothing happens without a vision, and when I think about that, I realize we've not been a people without a vision.

In displays around this place there are brochures which are way out of date, and one of them, "Dreaming the Future," ought to be reprinted because it is a roadmap of our history, starting in 1971 with a statement that we printed on our liturgies at that time, a nice quote from the Catholic theologian Hans Küng who talks about a conception of the church that was new and fresh and was the expression of the emerging grace that this community was beginning to embody. Then there's another document out of 1980, and then there is the one we print now on the back of our liturgies from 1993, and finally on the back of the brochure there is a panel from 1995 when we celebrated 125 years. If you read that, you will see some of the old language. Then you will see some of the old conceptions begin to be challenged, and finally you will see what we have now which we print on everything that we send out. It's really time to add another

panel to this. But, as I look at that, I realize anew that we've always had a vision, and of course, vision doesn't spring out of a vacuum. Someone has to lead and be the catalyst for that, and for better or worse, that's been my role over these years.

David had a vision of a temple and David brought that vision and the people responded. They embraced the vision, and there was such excitement of the vision realized, that it was pure joy and they had a party and they celebrated just *for the joy of it all*. Because when you do see something and when you do embrace something and get caught up in something, you get released from yourself and your own small world and you become a part of something that's grander, something that's wonderful, something that elicits the best in the human spirit that has marked us.

Paul had a vision of Jew and Gentile in one body in Christ, and he traveled the ancient world and experienced all kinds of trouble and affliction and suffering, but it was that vision that drove him and he said to the Gentile congregations, "If you give me an offering, we can help people suffering in Jerusalem and those Jewish Jesus people who are poor," and they did it with joy out of their own poverty as a sign of a new kind of community. I think that has been what has marked us and it will continue to mark us. This is not the end. It is the beginning of a grand new beginning.

Last week Don Hoekstra told us how he was accosted in the hardware store by someone who said, "Where are you now?" and he said, "At Christ Community." The man said, "Why would you be in a place like that? They don't believe anything, they don't have any creed, everybody is his own authority." I want to say to such a person, "Don't believe anything? Dear God, we believe something. We believe in a community. We believe in the creation of human community."

Now, I suppose in a lot of congregations that sounds rather pale, but I'll stand by it and I'm more convinced of it all the time. We believe in the creation of human community because we believe that God is within us and God is among us, and it is in the experience of community that we have the touch of grace, the sense of the sacred and the holy.

I was at Duba's table last Tuesday. Duncan Littlefair has celebrated his 91st birthday on the same day that Nancy celebrated her birthday, and he has had a tough summer. He's had some medical problems. But, we got back to Duba's Tuesday and he sat at the table and he spoke about the darkness of pain, of coming up to the very edge, and then coming back to experience the wonder and the awe of the ordinary, of a tree turning its leaves, of his pet dog, and of that table at which the five of us lifted our glasses to the wonder, miracle, joy and glory of life. I'll tell you, it's a holy moment. And here, when we gather week after week, or in small groups, or one to one and we meet each other, we meet each other in honesty and authenticity, soul connecting to soul. That's the experience of the holy, of the sacred, and of God.

I just read a book by the fine scholar, Elaine Pagels of Princeton, who has done a lot of work on the other Gospels that didn't make the cut [to be part of the Scriptures], and this is a book, *Beyond Belief* and the first chapter is "From the Feast of Agape to the Nicene Creed."

On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a T-shirt and running shorts, I stepped into the vaulted stone vestibule of the Church of Heavenly Rest in New York to catch my breath and warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death.

That morning I had gone for an early morning run while my husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son were still sleeping. The previous night I had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors at Babies Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, had performed a routine checkup on our son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open-heart surgery. The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare lung disease. Disbelieving the results, they tested further for six hours before they finally called us in to say that Mark had pulmonary hypertension, an invariably fatal disease, they told us. How much time? I asked. "We don't know, a few months, a few years." . . . Standing in the back of the church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. Yet the celebration in progress spoke of hope; perhaps that is what made the presence of death bearable. Before that time, I could only ward off what I had heard and felt the day before.

I returned often to that church, not looking for faith but because, in the presence of that worship and the people gathered there—and a smaller group that met on weekdays in the church basement for mutual encouragement—my defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. In that church I gathered new energy, and resolved, over and over, to face whatever awaited us as constructively as possible for Mark, and for the rest of us. When people would say to me, "Your faith must be of great help to you," I would wonder, What do they mean? What is faith? Certainly not simple assent to the set of beliefs that worshipers in that church recited every week ("We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...")—traditional statements that sounded strange to me, like barely intelligible signals from the surface, heard at the bottom of the sea. Such statements seemed to me then to have little to do with whatever transactions we were making with one another, with ourselves, and—so it

was said—with invisible beings I was acutely aware that we met there driven by need and desire; yet sometimes I dared hope that such communion has the potential to transform us."

The Feast of Agape was where that early community gathered together and they broke bread together and they loved each other and they embraced each other. Elaine Pagels said that's what happened to the church. It went from the feast of love to the Nicene Creed, "I believe in one God ..."

I believe that we are about creating human community. We do not worship some God "out there," some supernatural being, some heavy policeman holding a stick of morality, hemming us in, caging us up. We are a human community and it is in our human relationships that we experience the God within us and the God among us. We come here to weep and to laugh and to embrace and to hope. We come here to question and to quest. We come here to care for each other and love each other. It is the community, dear friends, it is the human community, and it is the human community in which I know the sacred and I experience the touch of God. When that gets through to me, what can I do but have a party?

References:

Elaine Pagels. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Random House, 2003.