

Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson
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“INVITED TO THE PARTY”

Isaiah 55:1-13

Are you ready for the *partay*? That’s what the teenagers in one of my churches called it. The word, *partay*, basically means a big bash where you can have a lot of fun. Are you ready for the partay here in worship?

I suppose some of you may be a little uneasy at the idea of riotous celebration—especially in the church of all places! “Good heavens! What will they think of next? Dancing in the church?” It did cross my mind, but knowing Lutherans like I do after hanging around with you for almost 10 years, I didn’t think it would go over very well!

There are some concerns about this ‘be happy’ attitude. I mean, people are dying in Ethiopia and Ukraine (which is why their national flags are in the chancel as a reminder). And people are losing their freedoms in China and Turkey and Palestine; and people are being thrown out of their homes and living on the streets. How could we be so flippant about life? We can’t pretend that ‘all is well’ when the world is falling apart...can we?

It’s a good point to raise...but I keep thinking back to the first century when poor people were starving, good people were being crucified, and a lot of people were dying from diseases. The average life span for a man was only 33 years; people were sold into slavery or thrown into prison for the smallest of debts; and foreign tyrants oppressed the lives of just about everyone...and yet...yet a well-known rabbi took time out to party. His name was Jesus.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes Solomon concludes, “**For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:...a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance...**” Within this experience we call life, there is a time for a whole host of human emotions. Our liturgical calendar for the church was set up to reflect those rhythms of life. There are high, joyous moments like Easter and low, somber moments like Lent. It’s all about rhythm, realizing that life has different emotions. Sometimes we’re up, and sometimes we’re down—crushed to the ground. If we can express our deepest sorrows in the church, why not our wildest joys? As one of my all-time favorite sayings puts it, “Life may not be the party we hoped for, but as long as we’re here, we might as well dance.”

Those words recognize that we have choices in life in spite of our circumstances.

Two deaf men are signing to each other. The first man asks, “What did your wife say to you when you got home late last night?”

The other responds, “She swore a blue streak.”

The first guy says, “What did you do?”

The second replies, “I turned out the lights.”

There are a lot of things wrong with life, but there’s a lot more right. Sometimes we just have to take a break from the heavy stuff and turn out the lights.

One day I wasn’t feeling so hot so I went to the doctor. After doing a test, he told me that my problem could be due to an infection. Then he added, “Or it could be a bladder stone or even a tumor.”

That’s the way it always is in life—life is filled with ‘could be’s. Things could be worse than they appear. But is that what we want to dwell on—the worst case scenarios? What about *today*? Do you want to rob the chance of enjoying this day by worrying about what might or might not be coming your way? Well, I choose not to worry. I’m choosing to celebrate today. It’s what I need; it’s part of the rhythm of my life; it’s what I believe.

Today is a day for joy. It’s Sunday! It’s the weekly celebration of our Lord’s resurrection, for Pete’s sake! As those two slackers in the old 70’s movie *Wayne’s World* are remembered for saying, “Party on, Wayne! Party on, Garth!” Today you are invited to party on!

Well, then, what’s the occasion for the party? That’s an easy answer. God is here. God is the reason for the party. Life in God is always a party.

Why? Because life in God fills us with good things.

Back in the 5th century before Jesus, things weren’t going so well for God’s people. The nation of Judah has been carried off into exile in Babylon, and they despaired of their lack of freedom and forced removal from their sacred land. The words of our Old Testament reading for today bring hope and the promise of restoration, hope of a day when things would be better, a return to the joy of knowing God’s blessing. Isaiah 55 begins with an invitation: **“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”**

If that’s not an invitation to a party, I don’t know what is! It’s a free-for-all full of good things—a dieter’s holiday, a gourmet’s delight!

Undoubtedly, our nation is known for its excesses, particularly in the area of eating. Our national girth is huge, especially after the pandemic. Eating is our obsession. Where else in the world do you have professional eaters who make a

living by gorging themselves at pie-eating or hot-dog-eating or pancake-eating contests? Why, there's even a matzo-ball-eating contest in Manhattan! Rapper Badlands Booker currently holds that title.

Well, what about Jesus? What did he think about partying? Christian singer Michael Card wrote, "Whenever Jesus wasn't preaching or teaching, you'd find him at a party. It might be at a tax collector's or even a Pharisee's home. The guests might include power men in the community or the riffraff. What seemed to bother the stuffy, 'religious' types wasn't that Jesus went to parties, but the He seemed to enjoy himself too much. That, I believe is why they called him a glutton and a winebibber.

"It was at just such a party that Jesus performed his first miracle... The miracle was the turning of water into wine, some four hundred gallons of it!

"I've heard many theological explanations about that first miracle. 'Jesus simply speeded up a natural process because, of course, in nature grapevines take water and turn them into wine,' some say... Such explanations miss the point, I think. The point is that running out of wine is the surest way of bringing a party to a grinding halt, and Jesus' provision allowed the party to go on."

By turning water into wine, wasn't Jesus, in effect, saying, "Party on!"?

Isaiah calls to the desperate refugees of his day, "**Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!**" In his own day Jesus called to the crowds, "**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.**" Jesus got the Samaritan women at the well all excited by saying, "**Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.**"

And in our Gospel lesson for today Jesus looks out over the hungry crowd and feeds them—thousands of them! In John's version of this miracle Jesus says to the religious leaders who were complaining about the free-food extravaganza, "**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.**"

What's this all about? Good things! Blessings! Jesus taught about the abundance of life with God, and he modeled the same by his continual party-going.

Can't you look around at your life and see the blessings stuck in every corner? We don't all share the same blessings, and we don't all have the same amount of good things, but this much we do know: we all have more blessings than we can count, and many more than we deserve. Isn't that a reason for joy and celebration? We who belong to God, who have been called close by Jesus, are rich! We are wealthy in the things that count, no matter how many or few our material blessings. We know family; we know friends; we know food and drink, homes and vacations, education and health. We know life and grace and peace and hope. Today we party because life in God is filled with good things, like the finest wine and the richest cream. We're livin' the high life in God!

Life in God gives us rest from our striving, too.

We live in a restless world. A lot of things I used to joke about as a kid are off-limits today. If you think I'm kidding, just say the word 'bomb' in an airport. Just TP a neighbor's house. You can get arrested for these things today! Why? Because we are surrounded by nervous, restless people who think that everything and everyone is working against them—some sort of evil global conspiracy.

This same attitude gives people a driven spirit. They work long hours or multiple jobs to support lifestyles that are supposed to signal success. They run their kids all over creation to give them a competitive edge in athletics and education. They seek the company of the influential so that they will be named to important positions in business and politics. At the end of the day they fall exhausted into bed, often unable to catch even the bare minimum of sleep because they are still thinking about how to succeed, how to avoid failure, how to keep from being hurt by the threats of life.

Now, there is nothing wrong with excellence. Indeed, our world could use *more* of that! And I'm not putting down people who have to work multiple jobs to survive in an inflation-ridden, low-wage economy. But the pursuit of excellence and the struggle for survival are not the same as an obsession with making it big. To those who are weary from a spirit that drives them relentlessly day after day, God says, "Let it go." Or as Isaiah wrote, **"My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

In others words, you can relax! Just accept that you are mortal, you are finite, you are fallible, you are delightfully human—and it's okay. Seek God and you won't *have to* be your own master. Trust God and you won't *have to* figure out everything by yourself. Give things over to God and you won't *have to* do everything on your own. You can rest!

Jesus called to the stressed out people of his day, **"Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heaven burdens, and I will give you rest."** The truth that captures this invitation to rest is grace. Grace is what lets us 'Let go and let God!' Grace is what gives us the freedom to stop worrying about what might happen. Grace is the refreshing assurance that everything will be okay in the end, regardless of what it looks like right now. Grace is like a party.

Author Tony Campolo wrote a book many years ago entitled, *"The Kingdom of God is a Party."* In it Campolo wrote, "Christians should be people who create celebrations." Why? Because we know a peace within us that nothing can destroy. We're free from fear.

Spiritual giant Evelyn Underhill said it this way: "Heaven is to be in God at last made free." That's exactly the promised hope we have as God's people. Not

just in heaven, but starting now! As Jesus taught, **“Truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.”** Aren’t those dancin’ words? Don’t they mean that we don’t have to kill ourselves striving for more? Isn’t that what retirement is all about? Isn’t that why you spend so much time outdoors doing nothing but knocking a little white ball around a grassy course? (Just don’t turn your golf game into a drive for a competitive edge, or the whole idea of recreation, re-creation, will be lost.) We live by grace. We’ve been freed from a driven spirit.

Life in God fills us with good things. Life in God gives us rest from our striving. Finally, life in God brings us incredible joy.

What do we do when we’re dripping with joy? We throw parties!

According to Jesus, God throws parties, too! Remember the parable of the prodigal son? What did the father do when the younger son returned home? He threw a party! You know who that father in the parable is, don’t you? God!

If God is throwing parties when we come back to him, if the angels are dancing over the sinners that come home, don’t you think we ought to have a little more laughter and gladness in our own souls?

Isaiah’s words to the exiles hold this promise: **“You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”** Now that’s what I call a real partay—happy people, even mountains singing, trees applauding!

Haven’t you ever heard the poor Christians of this world singing their hearts out in Africa and the Caribbean? How could we *not* sing and dance with joy and party on when we know the promises of God? And yet, do we? Christians can be the most dour and sour-looking of all people. Maybe you’ve met some of those ne’er-crack-a-smile believers who think that it’s their life’s calling to be cynics, critics, and condemners.

Counselor and spiritual guide Brennan Manning says that unbelievers stay unbelievers because they see Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. Could this be why so many people in Spring Hill and Brooksville, Weeki Wachee and Homosassa stay home on Sunday mornings? They know too many people who talk about the joy of coming to Jesus but who look like they just came from a mortuary.

Noted interpreter of faith and culture, Dick Staub, authored a book called *“Too Christian, Too Pagan”* in which he wrote, “I recently attended a wedding of a young couple whose pastor’s remarks were carefully chosen, appropriate, and delivered well, but his impact that evening was diminished by one seemingly insignificant decision. He apparently decided his work was complete when the ceremony was finished and was therefore notably absent at the reception, an elegant and extravagant celebration set exquisitely at a local country club. In my view he made the classic error of thinking ministry happens at church but not at the

party...People solemnly watch the ceremony, but the party after the wedding is festive and recreational. Jesus understood this and seemed to spend considerable time at meals and parties hosted by pagans.”

What Staub is hinting at is that this joy we know from our life in God should send us out into the world where we can show our joy to those who are seeking it.

Repeatedly in the New Testament our eternal life with God is described as sitting at the banquet table of feasting with the Messiah. God even promises that someday we will reign with Christ, cohosting the heavenly party where joy is never ending. If this is our destiny and the destiny of all who come to God, wouldn't we want to get the word out? Wouldn't we want to live out our joy before others?

Tony Campolo wrote, “While there is much that can be done within the church to stimulate joy and celebration, it is really what happens outside the church while God's people are scattered in the world that gives to a church its best party spirit...In a real sense, there can be no celebration if there is nothing to celebrate. It is only when people are aware of good things that God is doing in their everyday lives that they have joy to share when they gather together for worship.”

Did you catch that? We can only have a good old party here on Sunday when we're excited about all the things God is doing in and through us during the week. And what would make us most excited? People's lives being changed! And what would change people's lives? Coming to God! And why would people want to come to God? Because they see a changed life in us! And what would they see? Our contagious joy!

You see, it's one big circle. When we go out of here with joy, the joy of belonging to God, then other people will see that joy and want to know why we have it. That will lead to sharing and inviting; and, when we do that, others will find that joy so that, when we meet together, we'll have one grand partay.

Who, then, is invited to this partay? Isaiah wrote, “**Ho, everyone who thirsts...**” You mean the homeless man who lives in the woods beside the church and reads his Bible every day? Everyone! What about the Vietnam and Gulf War vets with PTSD on the streets of Tampa? Everyone! What about the young girl born in the wrong body and the teenage boy struggling to figure out who he loves? Everyone! What about the woman who has been trying to make her marriage work for 20 years but can't do it any longer? Everyone! What about the refugee from Afghanistan who risked his life for our soldiers? Everyone! What about the immigrants from Ukraine, Haiti, and Central America who are escaping from violence and war? Everyone! What about the people in our community who speak with an accent just like our grandparents did? Everyone! What about the single mother who is poor and searching for the best for her children? Everyone! What about the shoeless kids at REZ House and their undocumented parents? Everyone!

What about those people we think have lost their political minds and vote the exact opposite from us? Everyone! *Everyone* is invited to the party. It's not I who am saying that. It's God. **“Ho, everyone... come!”**

It's God's wish. This Sunday gathering is hosted by the Lord, and all are welcome. Here's the question: Will *you* come? Will *you* join the party? Do you know that there are some in this world who don't come to the party because they don't like others who have been invited. Isn't that ridiculous?!

Life in God fills us with good things. Life in God gives us rest from our striving. Life in God brings us incredible joy. Life in God is a party, and everyone is invited.

Will you come? Yes, you have troubles in life; some of you have a lot of them; but for the moment, party on! Yes, tough times are knocking at the door, even more so with every passing year; party on! Yes, there are threats all around you, the news is full of dire predictions; party on! Every Sunday is a celebration of life given to us in Jesus' resurrection. Come to the party today!

Amen.