

Sermon for February 3, 2019

“Jesus Loved to Party”

Luke 19:1-10, Matthew 11:19

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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News is that the biggest party of the year is the Super Bowl, being played tonight in Atlanta, Georgia, between the Los Angeles Rams and the New England Patriots. Weather won't be a factor since it's a domed stadium. Tickets are a couple thousand dollars at minimum, and I don't even want to know what they're charging for nachos. But the place will be packed, one giant party that starts in Atlanta, and then it travels all around the country, and even overseas, with great interest. Do you have a team in the game today? Any Rams fans? Any Patriots fans? I wonder if Jesus has a favorite? I expect him to be there, don't you? Jesus loves a good party. He always has.

Remember the wedding at Cana? Jesus was there with his disciples; his mother was there, too; and when the wine ran out, Mary pestered Jesus to fix it. “MOM?” “Fix it, Jesus!” And he turned large containers of water used for ceremonial cleansing into wine – the good stuff – good enough for those who had had plenty to drink already to notice – “He saved the good stuff till last.” Jesus loved a good party; so much so that we get the critique in Matthew 11. Jesus knew what some people were saying. “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” But he didn't spend any time refuting their criticism except to say “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,” or some translations say “by her children.” In other words, watch me and see how much good it can do meeting people where they are and engaging them. “I came to seek and to save the lost.”

He did that in Jericho. On the road into town, Jesus had encountered a blind man begging. The disciples tried to quiet him down and let Jesus move on through, but Jesus stopped and met the man. “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, let me see again.” And Jesus healed him and acknowledged this man's faith. All the people saw it happen and the

swarm of people carried them right into Jericho where word spread quickly, so much so that a man named Zacchaeus was curious enough to want to get a look at this miracle worker. Oh, did I mention, Zacchaeus was a tax collector; a chief tax collector; and he was rich. Well, yeah. Skimming taxes, and then skimming his subordinates, too. He was doing really well. Life was good, except it was hard to have good friends. Those around him were always looking for a break or a piece of the action, hangers-on. Oh, and did you notice, he was short; so short that he needed to climb a tree to see over people when Jesus' procession came into town. And like so many other times when Jesus could notice the person in need in the midst of a crowd, Jesus saw Zacchaeus up that tree.

"Hey, Zacchaeus," Jesus knew his name. "Come down out of that tree and let's go have a party at your house." There goes Jesus with his bad habits again. He invited himself to dinner, and at the home of a notable sinner, a colluder with the Romans, collecting their taxes, and a cheat to boot. Jesus, what are you doing? Ever wonder what they had to eat. What were the party foods of the first century? Probably pretty much what they ate every day: bread, olives, grapes, figs, pomegranates, vegetables, and certainly they had some meat for a party, like maybe lamb and a lot of spices. Not quite what the Super Bowl parties are serving today.

And the criticism came quickly. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Duh! Anyone look in the mirror lately? Must have been some party, though. Zacchaeus' whole life changed. "I'll give half my possessions to the poor, and I'll return four times what I have defrauded anyone." Wow! Talk about making amends. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and a party was as good a place as any to make that happen. Makes we wonder what so many of the church fathers were thinking when they chose solitude and self-denial.

Leonard Sweet writes, "if you know anything about Jesus' bad habits of 'eating and drinking,' you might wonder what Macarius of Alexandria, or Serapion, or Pachomius, of Finnhua, or Ite, or Ciaran, or Kevin were thinking as disciples of Jesus, since their habits are a far cry from Jesus' party habit. These later disciples did things like eating no cooked food for seven years; or spending seven years suspended by the armpits from iron shackles; or

remaining in a standing posture for seven years; or mixing bread with sand; or sleeping naked in a marsh for six months, exposing the skin to poisonous flies; or not going horizontal to sleep for forty or fifty years, never speaking a word, carrying heavy weights wherever they went... all of them competing in the marathon of extreme ascetism, to try to be more spiritual. Even one of our favorite saints, St. Francis of Assisi, sprinkled ashes like salt into his food for fear he would enjoy it too much.” Where did they get it that you have to practice self-torture and look sad all day in order to be more spiritual, when God clearly loves a party.

Sure, there was the crucifixion, “the man of sorrows,” and there is the book of Lamentations. We all have sorrow in life. But even in the midst of Lamentations’ trials there is a promise in Lamentations 3:22-23 – “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Great is your faithfulness.

The early church caught on to this party theme for the most part. Acts 2:46 and following report – “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. AND day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Yes, because they were happy and they enjoyed a good party, so others were curious and wanted to find out what was going on with these Christians!

Food was often around when Jesus was teaching and healing and ministering, feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000; and then there’s that beatitude about hungering and thirsting for righteousness. My sense is that Jesus was probably never happier than after a good day of preaching, teaching, and serving, and sharing a good meal with those around him. He even cooked breakfast for them on the beach after his resurrection. As Sweet writes it, “Jesus took great delight in giving delight and in delighting in life.... Jesus took great delight in the beauty of God’s existence and loved to celebrate God’s blessings in the company of others. For Jesus, life was all about relationships, especially God’s relationship with his people. Humankind was meant to live an abundant life in relationship with God, who fills us and frees us. So why not enjoy a good party, especially with sinners, so that they can see how Jesus parties. No, he

wasn't a drunkard and a glutton, but he enjoyed the stuff of life, and he loved sharing it with God's people, whether they knew it yet or not.

“The church above all should be a place of festivities and joy. People should look at the church and think, ‘What joyful people!’ If more of the church shared Jesus’ bad habit of loving to party, it would be the place everyone would want to be. Think about it.