

"Jesus, the Life of the Party"

Matthew 14:13-21

Pentecost 13-A, August 3, 2014

I have always been grateful to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that he performed his first miracle at a party; you know, right there at that **Wedding Feast in the village of Cana (John 2:1-11)**. It was there that our Lord **increased the joy of the bride and the groom**, of their parents and of all the invited guests by changing somewhere in between 120 gallons, maybe even up to as much as some 180 gallons of water, into **fresh sparkling, high-quality, vintage wine!**

Why so much wine! Let's remember that in this particular day and culture that the Wedding Feast did not last merely for **three or four hours**, but was actually a celebration to last a whole week long, **for seven days**. In addition to this, more than likely every resident in the village of Cana would have been invited! **And Jesus was the life of the party!**

I am glad that Jesus performed his first miracle at a party, because there are always those people who live with the giant misconception that once you become a Christian, Jesus' first order of business is to extract all the joy and fun out of your life completely, when nothing could be further from the truth. These are the same people who falsely imagine our Lord to be a killjoy or the ultimate party pooper!

Why the Bible itself is just chocked-full of story after story of various parties that God himself both initiates and commands! (1) In **Deuteronomy 14**, for example, we read that God commands his people to gather in a place that he would designate for them anew each year as his chosen sanctuary. Those who lived close enough to the designated place were to bring **1/10 of their freshly harvested fruits and vegetables, along with 1/10 of their livestock and game** with them. But **those who lived far more distantly were given the opportunity to sell their produce and livestock back home and convert them into cash.** And what does the Lord God tell them that they are to do with that money when they arrive at the place of celebration? In **verse 26**, we read: **"Spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink; whatever your appetite craves. You are to eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice" (Deut. 14:26-27)!**

(2) In **I Chronicles 12** we read of that time when a young man named David had to flee for his very life from the crazed King Saul, who was hotly in pursuit after him. David travels to a place named Ziklag. A few days after he is there, to his great surprise, **300,000 men show up with swords and plenty of food**, and there are caravans of people who come from near and far to throw a party! We read in **verse 38**: **"They feasted and drank with David for three days, for preparation had been made for their arrival, people from nearby and from far away, who brought food on donkeys, camels, mules and oxen. Vast supplies of flour, fig cakes, raisins, wine, oil, cattle, and sheep were brought to the celebration."**

These are only two instances, of the many times where God calls upon his people to celebrate at to throw a party! And Jesus himself often accepted invitations into the homes of various people to attend a party! I am thinking of the invitation Jesus accepted into the home of that man known as Simon the Leper (Luke 7). It was there that Jesus shares with a profound spiritual truth about the powerful connection between forgiveness and love. **"The one, who is forgiven much, loves much, but the one who is forgiven little, loves little!" (Luke 7:47)**

In his parables, like the **shepherd who returns home with that one lost sheep** that had gone astray, or the **woman who rediscovers her lost coin**, or the **father of the prodigal son**, who is so happy that his son is back home with him safe and sound, after he had gone out for some time and sown his wild oats—all of these parables end with a celebration and a party. And in the parable of the prodigal's return, the father orders the killing of the fatted

calf, for his servants to bring a robe, and sandals to put upon his son's, there is music and dancing, and all sorts good feasting going on!

I don't believe there is any other human figure whose coming into this world has resulted in the celebration of more parties than the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ into this world! Think of the Christmas and Easter parties inspired by him, century after century, after century, and still today!

Brothers and sisters, you can tell a lot about people from the parties that they throw! Every young man who has witnessed his friends getting married knows that there are "bachelor parties" and then again there are "bachelor parties."

WHOLESOME PARTIES are those opportunities to come away from the many responsibilities you have associated with your job or chosen profession, or to come away from family obligations, to just enjoy some relaxing time together, getting caught up on the latest things that have happened in each other's lives. There are funny stories that are told. People find it helpful to laugh at themselves and to laugh with one another.

BUT WE ALL KNOW THERE ARE THOSE OTHER TYPES OF PARTIES THAT BECOME NOTHING MORE THAN AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PEOPLE TO COME TOGETHER AND SIN.

In the first 12 verses of Matthew 14, Matthew tells about another party that had recently taken place within a close timeframe to this other, rather impromptu party, where Jesus feeds 5000 people with those five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:9), that we just read about in our Gospel lesson today!

1. The first party is a birthday bash that King Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee throws in honor of himself! Let me remind you that this Herod, Herod Antipas is remembered favorably in the chronicles of Roman history. He was a mighty builder, responsible to a large degree for having rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, and for installing Roman aqueducts in Judea, and for heading up many other worthwhile projects. He also founded a beautiful new city he named Tiberius, in honor of the present emperor, Tiberius Caesar or Caesar Tiberius.

But the Church remembers Herod Antipas chiefly as the one responsible for the martyrdom of John the Baptist. And you might remember what actually brings all of this on! John the Baptist had publicly reproved Herod for divorcing his wife to marry a woman who was actually his sister-in-law, his brother-Philip's wife, who had divorced her husband to marry him; a woman named Herodias, who was highly scandalized that John the Baptist would dare to publicly excoriate both of them for their sins! Shortly after this, that well-known statement that often falsely attributed to William Shakespeare, though in fact the 17th Century English playwright William Congreve wrote it came true: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned!"

Since it was his birthday John the Baptist decided to throw a great big birthday bash in honor of himself! And the Bible makes plain that this was much more than simply a "little family get-together". St. Mark tells us that Herod invited all of his "nobles, his military commanders, and all the leading men of Galilee to be there" (Mark 6:21).

This was an evening planned by Herod with the purpose of his hoping to bump up his own favorability in the public opinion polls a few notches. So Herod takes it upon himself to plan the floorshow, inviting his new wife's daughter **Salome**, to come into the court that evening and to **dance a very provocative type of dance**; the kind of dance that would have probably made her an

excellent contestant on that popular TV show today known as "Dancing with the Stars."

And her performance must have indeed been nothing short of spectacular, for at its conclusion, Herod stands up and not only offers to his former niece, now his stepdaughter, a standing ovation, but something much more! The good food and the fine drink he was enjoying certainly must have clouded his judgment just a bit! According to St. Mark, Herod offers this young woman, **up to one-half of his kingdom; this young woman whose performance would probably have made the kind of "dirty dancing" that Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey in their 1987 box office hit by that same name, look tame!**

Salome doesn't request any of the types of things that a young woman with this kind of offer presented before her might choose today! She doesn't ask for a new sports car! She doesn't ask her step-father to set up a trust fund for her to secure her financial wealth, well into the future! She doesn't ask for any type of elective plastic surgery to enhance her already nearly-perfect figure.

No! What does she do? She goes to her mother for advice—to her mother with whom she probably enjoyed what psychologists would call today a very "symbiotic" relationship, which means in simple laymen's terms is that they were "joined at the hip." What does Herodias tell Salome to ask for? She said, **"Ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter!"**

Herod was certainly grieved by her request, because deep down inside of himself he knew that John the Baptist had been speaking the truth, and he was also fearful of the public's reaction, because John the Baptist was loved by so much of his constituency. But having made the offer in public, Herod had to keep his words. **Right away, Herod sends his soldiers to the dungeon to have John the Baptist beheaded, and the soldier soon brings back the gory head of John the Baptist, still oozing with blood and he presents it to Salome. Somehow the girl does not get sick at the sight, but takes it and gives it to her mother like a young girl bringing home a piece of artwork to her mother that she had just completed at school.** Unfortunately all the invited guests go home with that bloody gory image—no doubt—etched forever in their minds!

Someone has once said you can tell a lot about another person from the parties that they throw! Herod's birthday bash soon turns into an occasion for **lust, rash words, cowardice, seething hatred, murder** and who knows what other vices there were that rose to the surface and brought about the shameful unjust death of God's prophet, whom Jesus declares later to have been the greatest man ever born of a woman. And yet Jesus goes on to complement each of you and me personally, when he further says: **"But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John!"** (Matthew 11:11)

And it was **directly in response to Jesus' hearing about this gruesome death of John the Baptist that motivated him to withdraw from the place where he and his disciples were at, so that he might hopefully find refuge in a desolate place by himself,** to mourn the death of his beloved cousin, the one who came in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. John the Baptist was the voice of

that one out there crying in the wilderness, *“Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight paths for him! For every valley shall be filled in and every hill and mountain brought low!”*

When Jesus receives this terribly tragic news, he seeks to escape to the other side of the lake, around the north end of the Sea of Galilee, but those who are desperate for Jesus’ help and healing, run there on foot, and beat him to his chosen place of destination. **What does Jesus do? Does he yell out loud in a moment of great personal frustration: “What’s wrong with you people, can’t you see I’m tied, can’t you even give me a few moments peace?”** No Jesus simply continues to cure the sick among them, one by one and all of this takes a great deal of time.

The next thing you know, the sun begins to set and the disciples worry! They offer a suggestion! Jesus should dismiss these thousands of people and send them away, so they can go to villages nearby and purchase supper for themselves! These disciples’ petty logic, however, does not appeal to Jesus. He challenges his disciples by saying: *“They need not go away! You give them something to eat!”*

The disciples offer an excuse. The food they have available is only enough for one family.

So Jesus decides it’s time to give an impromptu party of his own; a huge picnic, right then and there. He tells the crowd to sit down on the grass and they do; in the family groups, thousands as far as the eye can see. Our Savior takes a couple of fish along with five loaves of bread. **He looks up to heaven. He blesses the loaves. He breaks them and he gives them to the disciples to distribute this food to crowds of people all around him!**

You know what happens next, and I sure, this was a surprise to everybody! There turns out to be enough food for everybody present! The party’s a splendid success! The only problem comes at the end; deciding what to do with the great abundance of leftovers! **AND ONCE AGAIN, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, JESUS HIMSELF IS THE LIFE OF THE PARTY!**

You can tell a lot about people by the parties that they throw. We find out more than we want to know about the pathetic King Herod! But what do we discover about Jesus from his impromptu picnic in the wilderness? Unlike Herod, he feels compassion for the hungry crowds! Unlike Herod he discerns what can be done for the poor! He welcomes somebody’s sacrifice of a simple meal, refusing to say that it is not enough! Looking upward and blessing the bread, Jesus recognizes that all we have is a gift from our God!

Herod’s party starts out with a command performance, the product of fear and a desire for prestige! A supposed celebration of life; his birthday bash ends with God’s prophet dead; a king compromised, and the onlookers either hardened or disgusted!

The party Jesus puts on is a response to human need! It is motivated by compassion. People come to it hungry and they go away satisfied. They are given a reason to believe that the God who delivered their ancestors repeatedly has not forsaken them either, but is still at work in their own lives too.

The wilderness picnic hosted by Jesus stands in stark contrast to the birthday bash hosted by Herod.

But these are **not simply past events, but they remain two very different options between the kinds of parties we may choose to attend today!** The party Jesus puts on is a response to human need; motivated by compassion. People come to it hungry and they go forth satisfied. They're given a reason to believe that the God who delivered their ancestors repeatedly, has not forsaken them either, but is still very much at work in the world!

One is the way to death and the other way is to life. We are welcome at each of them, and the invitations come to us often. Herod's party is easy to find; it is the way of the world. The picnic Jesus puts on can be harder to locate; it occurs in an out-of-the-way place.

Despite the crown he wore, Herod showed himself to be a slave to the world. Jesus wore no crown on that day, yet he reigns eternally as King. He comes as a new and better Moses to lead us out from our land of bondage into his realm of true and lasting freedom.

The Jesus picnic may seem at times remote, yet this morning it is near at hand. For at our celebration of his Holy Supper, Jesus serves as our wilderness host, and the bread he multiplies among us so wonderfully is his gift of himself. Herod's banquet costs the life of another. The banquet Jesus spreads before us today comes at the price of his own life, a life that proves stronger than death.

You know what he said earlier on that same occasion as St. John records this event to us. Jesus said, *"I am the Bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink! Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me!"* (John 6:35-51)

Once again this morning, for us also, brothers and sisters, Jesus is the life of the party; *"The One who bore our sins in his body unto death on a tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; through him by whose stripes we are healed (I Peter 2:24)* Amen