

The Kingdom of God is a Party!

By Tony Campolo
2009 09/27/2009

When Jesus came into the world, he declared that he had come that his joy might be in us and that our joy might be full. Consequently, it's not surprising that when people asked him what his kingdom would be like - this world that he wants to create - he said, "My kingdom is likened unto a wedding feast. A wedding feast and I'm the bridegroom and as long as you have a bridegroom around, you party." That was his word; it was to be a wedding feast.

Now I have to tell you that Jesus was Jewish, which is the next best thing to being Italian. Sometimes people ask me if Italians are so wonderful, why didn't Jesus come as an Italian? Well the Bible says he came to humble himself. But, Jews and Italians and Palestinians, all Arab people, the Greeks, all who live in the Mediterranean area, we have one thing in common. We know how to throw weddings. I mean there is nothing more joyful, more celebratory than an Italian, a Jewish, a Greek, or an Arab wedding. I mean, we mortgage the house, we take the money out of the bank, we bring in the band, we go on and on. Jesus said that's what my kingdom's like - my kingdom's likened unto one gigantic party. So, the next time they ask you what time is it at the Crystal Cathedral, you're going to yell back, "It's party time!" Indeed it is. It's always been that way.

When people repent - when they surrender their lives to Christ and say take my sin upon yourself up on the cross, forgive me, and make me into a new creation - the Bible says there is a party in heaven; the angels gather around and celebrate. Beyond that, there's celebration all through the scriptures. Whenever Jesus tells the story of repentance, it's always about celebration.

The prodigal son, you know that story - he takes half of his father's money goes off into a distant land, wastes his father's money in all kinds of terrible ways, runs out of money, and he has to take a job feeding pigs. Can you imagine a Jewish person feeling as he feeds pigs? And he starts saying to himself, "What am I doing here? There are people who work on my father's farm. They live better than I do. I know what I'll do; I'll rise, and I'll go back, and I'll see my father, and I'll say, 'Father I am no longer worthy to be called one of your sons. Make me one of your hired servants.'" Now, if you're going to go home after blowing half of your father's wealth, you'd better rehearse your speech. All the way home he's practicing over and over again: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against thee. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

The Bible says his father sees him when he's yet a far distance far off, runs out, and throws his arms around him. The boy starts his little talk, "Father I have sinned against heaven and against thee..."

The father interrupts, "Harry, go get a robe and throw put it on this kid. He's got rags."

"...I am no longer worthy to be called thy son..."

"Jim, get a ring put it on his finger to celebrate this day!"

"...make me one of your..."

"Knock it off, son! Hey Bill, out behind the barn there's a fat calf. Kill that sucker. We're going to have a party!"

What time is it? It's party time!

It's the same with Zacchaeus. Do you remember Zacchaeus? You sang about him in vacation Bible school, "Well, he was a wee little man." Remember? And Jesus comes to town, and he's walking down the main street, and poor little Zacchaeus, he can't get up to the front to see Jesus walking by. You know the rest of the story from the song: "He climbed up in the sycamore tree, for he wanted his Lord to see." Remember this? At last, the Savior came walking by, he looked up in the tree, and he said, "Zacchaeus you're a dirty filthy sinner and you're going to burn in hell forever." No, that's not what he said. He said, "Yo, Zach! Come on down. We're going to your house today. We're going to have a..." What time is it? It's party time! You're catching on.

Indeed, it's all about celebration and it's a special type of celebration because it's a celebration and a joy that comes from sin forgiven when you come into a relationship with Christ. Your sins are blotted out and buried in the deepest sea. Remembered no more. The burdens are lifted. The burdens are removed.

The psychologists tell us that most people, because of the dark and ugly things they've done, practice a process called repression; they push it into the depths of their being. And it's there even though they don't remember it. However, it continues to torture them, and the guilt creates depression. But, when you surrender to Christ, he cleanses you and makes you into a new creation. Old things pass away; behold all things become new. And the guilt is removed and the joy of the Lord is yours. It's a joy that comes from the forgiveness of sins. "Oh my sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part, but in whole is nailed to the cross. I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul." It's the joy that comes from the forgiveness of sins.

However, there's another dimension to it. There's also something special about the joy of the Lord because it's a joy that, if you have it as a gift of the Holy Spirit, it's something you have to share with other people, and if you don't share it, you lose it. As a matter of fact, a lot of people don't understand that their own joy is contingent upon their ability to communicate God's joy to others.

M. Scott Peck, the very, very famous psychologist, was once on his way to an appointment. He had a woman with him who was suffering from a clinical depression. He had to make a stop at the hospital. He gave her the names of three persons who were patients of his that were in the hospital, and he said, "While I'm doing what I have to do, would you visit these people and try to cheer them up?" And she did.

When he met her at the front desk at the end of the hour, her face was aglow with joy. She said, "I've never felt happier. This is the most joy I've felt since I can ever remember.

He said, Wonderful. Now we know what will give you joy and will end your depression."

She said, "Well, you don't expect me to do that every day do you?"

Why is it that people turn away from what God wills for them? Turn away from the life that God wants them to live? Turn away from doing what Jesus wants them to do to share the salvation story and to bring joy into the lives of those who don't have much to be joyful about?

I had to go to speak in Honolulu. Well, sometimes you get L.A. and sometimes you get Honolulu. If you go to Honolulu, because of the distance from the east coast where I live, there's a six-hour time difference. And I woke up at about three o'clock in the morning and I was hungry and I wanted to get something to eat. But, in a hustling city like Honolulu at three o'clock in the morning, it's hard to find anything that's open. Up a side street, I spotted this greasy spoon, and I went in. It was one of these dirty places and they didn't have any booths, just row of stools at the counter. I sat down a bit uneasy and I didn't touch the menu. It was one of those plastic menus and grease had piled up on it. I knew that if I opened it, something extraterrestrial would have crawled out. All of the sudden, this very heavy-set, unshaved man with a cigar came out of the back room, put down his cigar, and said, "What do you want?"

I said, "I'd like a cup of coffee and a donut."

He poured the coffee and then he scratched himself and, with the same hand, picked up the donut. I hate that. So, there I am, three-thirty in the morning, drinking my coffee, and eating this dirty donut. And into the place comes about eight or nine prostitutes. It's a small place, they sit on either side of me, and I tried to disappear. The woman on my immediate right was very boisterous and she said to her friend, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine."

Her friend said, "So what do you want me to do? Do you want me to sing happy birthday? Should we have a cake a party? It's your birthday."

The first woman said, "Look, why do you have to put me down? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. I don't expect to have one now."

That's all I needed. I waited until they left and I called Harry over and I asked, "Do they come in here every night?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "The one right next to me..." "Agnes."

"Tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about decorating the place? When she comes in tomorrow night, we'll throw a birthday party for her. What do you think?"

He said, "Mister, that is brilliant. That is brilliant!" He called his wife out of the back room. "Jan, come out here. I want you to meet this guy. He wants to throw a birthday party for Agnes."

She came out and took my hand and squeezed it tightly, and said, "You wouldn't understand this, mister, but Agnes is one of the good people, one of the kind people in this town. And nobody ever does anything for her, and this is a good thing. I said, "Can I decorate the place?"

She said, "To your heart's content."

I said, "I'm going to bring a birthday cake..."

Harry said, "Oh no! The cake's my thing!"

So, I got there the next morning at about two-thirty. I had bought the streamers at the K-mart, strung them about the place. I had made a big poster - ""Happy Birthday Agnes" - and put it behind the counter. I had the place spruced up. Everything was set. Everything was ready. Jan, who does the cooking, she had gotten the word out on the street. By three-fifteen, every prostitute was squeezed into this diner. People, it was wall-to-wall prostitutes and me!

Three-thirty in the morning, in come Agnes and her friends. I've got everybody set, everybody ready. As they come through the door, we all yell, "Happy birthday Agnes!" In addition, we start cheering like mad. I've never seen anybody so stunned. Her knees buckled. They steadied her and sat her down on the stool. We all started singing, "Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to you!"

When they brought out the cake, she lost it and started to cry. Harry just stood there with the cake and said, "All right, knock it off Agnes. Blow out the candles. Come on, blow out the candles." She tried, but she couldn't, so he blew out the candles, gave her the knife, and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes."

She sat there for a long moment and then she said to me, "Mister, is it okay if I don't cut the cake? What I'd like to do, mister, is take the cake home and show it to my mother. Could I do that?"

I said, "It's your cake." She stood up, and I said, "Do you have to do it now?"

She said, "I live two doors down. Let me take the cake home and show it to my mother. I promise you I'll bring it right back." And she moved toward the door carrying the cake as though it was the Holy Grail. As she pushed through the crowd and out the door, the door swung slowly shut and there was stunned silence. You talk about an awkward moment. Everyone was motionless. Everyone was still I didn't know what to say.

So, I finally said, "What do you say, we pray?" It's weird looking back on it now. You know a sociologist leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes at three-thirty in the morning in a diner. But, it was the right thing to do. I prayed that God would deliver her from what dirty filthy men had done to her. You know how these things start - some ten, eleven, or twelve-year-old girl gets messed over and destroyed by some filthy man and then she goes downhill from there. And men use her and abuse her. I said, "God, deliver her and make her into a new creation because I've got a God who can make us new no matter where we've been or what we've been through." And I prayed that God would make her new.

When I finished my prayer, Harry leaned over the counter and he said, "Campolo, you told me you were a sociologist. You're no sociologist, you're a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when you come up with just the right words, I said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning."

I'll never forget his response. He looked back at me and he said, "No you don't, no you don't. I would join a church like that!"

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all like to belong to a church that threw birthday parties for whores at three-thirty in the morning? Well, I've got news for you. That is the kind of church that Jesus came to create. He came to bring celebration into people's lives that have had nothing to celebrate. This is true religion, says the epistle of James, to visit the fatherless, the widows, and the afflicted and bring celebration into their lives. He is the Christ who saves you from sin and fills you with his joy, commissions you to go out and to spread that joy to the world because the Lord has come.

The Lord has come. It's a joy that comes from forgiveness of sins. It's a joy that comes when you spread it to others by the grace of God. But lastly, it's a great joy that is able to permeate your life even in the midst of hard times. Even in the midst of suffering. That's what makes it different from happiness. Happiness depends on what happens. Joy is something that keeps you going even when what is happening isn't going well at all. You're sick, have cancer, trouble with your children, marriage falling apart - and in the midst of it all, we have these words from scripture, from Romans 8:28, and this is the proper translation: "In the midst of all that's going on all the messes of your life God is there with you, and he will enable you to bring something good out of it all if you just trust in him and allow his spirit to work through you to this end."

You may ask, "Do we understand each other?" Nevertheless, what you're thinking is, "You don't understand. I've got a daughter. She's on drugs my son's messed up; he's in jail. And it's hopeless." It's never hopeless.

In the words of that great American theologian Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till it's over." God will not give up on you or on your family. God will not give up on his world. He didn't come into the world to condemn the world but to deliver it and to give to the world joy, joy, joy, joy, unspeakable joy.

My church during my childhood was the New Berean Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. When it closed down, the nearest Baptist church was an African American church, and I went there as a teenager. It wasn't long after I joined the church that I went to my first funeral. My friend Clarence was killed in an accident. I had never been to a black funeral before. All the funerals I had been to

were Italian funerals with people yelling, screaming, and crying all over the place. And, this was the happiest thing I'd ever been to. For fifteen minutes, the minister at Clarence's funeral talked about the glory of life after death for those who trust in him. The minister made it sound so beautiful, so wonderful, that halfway through the funeral I wished I were dead. Then the minister came down, went over to the family, and said, "Let me give you some comforting words from scripture." And he did. He gave them comforting words of scripture. Then, the last thing he did was to go over to the open casket, and for the last twenty minutes, he preached to the corpse. You may think, wow what's that like? To preach to a corpse? Ask your pastor; he'll tell you.

He just yelled, he just yelled at that corpse. He just yelled at Clarence, and he said it with such authority that, people. I would not have been surprised had Clarence spoken back to the man. He said, "Clarence, there were a lot of things we should have said to you but didn't say. We're going to thank you now." Then, he went down this litany of things that Clarence had done for people, thanking Clarence over and over again. It was lovely, it was beautiful. He came to the end and then he said, "Well, that's it, Clarence. There's nothing more to say, and when there's nothing more to say, there's only one thing to say." Now, if you're a pastor conducting a funeral, do not try this - it won't work. But, it worked for him beautifully. He said, "There's only one thing to say, Clarence, when it's all said and done. Goodnight. Goodnight, Clarence." And he grabbed the lid of the casket, and he slammed it shut. Can you imagine it? "Good night Clarence."

Shock waves went over the congregation. When he lifted his head, you could see there was a smile on his face, and he said, Good night, Clarence, good night, because I know God is going to give you a good morning!"

Then, the choir stood and started singing on that great getting-up morning, "We shall rise we shall rise!" And we all jumped to our feet and were clapping and hugging each other. At that moment, I knew I was in the right church - a church that can take a funeral and turn it into a celebration. That's the church of Jesus Christ! "Oh death where is your sting? Oh, grave, where is your victory? Praise be to God! Who gives us victory!"

I invite you to the Christ who will give you joy because your sins will be forgiven. Who will give you joy because he commissions you to share that joy with other people. And when the dark times come and the sorrows of life overwhelm you, there will be joy because you will know that beyond the present time is the glorious present, the glorious gift that God has in store for all who trust in him. He makes it into a party time! Into a party time! Into a party time! So people, the next time they ask you at the Crystal Cathedral what time is it? I want to hear you shout back: "IT'S PARTY TIME!"

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