

“Religious? Right!”

a sermon by

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**Text: “One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice”
(Luke 17:15).**

Today we celebrate children and families, as Christy reminded us in her Minute for Mission, and there is much to celebrate. Celebration is demonstrable rejoicing, perceivable thanksgiving, and invitational summons. During the lunch on the lawn after worship, to which you are invited, there will be perceivable thanksgiving and demonstrable rejoicing. For now I want to say a word about celebration as invitational summons. True celebration has everything to do with mature seriousness, honesty, and courage, as exemplified in our biblical readings, to which I will turn in a moment.

G. K. Chesterton sums up the thesis of his magnificent little book, Orthodoxy, when he says: “Joy, ... the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”

“The small publicity of the pagan” is a fabulous turn of phrase and a wonderful insight. Think of the red carpet at any awards ceremony. Such stilted, staged, and utterly small joy! Yet these “awards” ceremonies are where, allegedly, we celebrate the wide and wild accomplishments of our culture at its best. Take another apparently “bigger” example. What joy would there be if the Panthers won the Super Bowl? In the stands, in front of TVs, and on the streets, Carolina people would be “losing it” with joy. But after that Sunday—off in some hoped for future—there will come another Monday, another week of work and routine, another set of obligations, demands, and duties. And the ecstasy of victory will give way to the agony of normal life. Even “Super” Bowl joy is “small.”

Our small pagan joys are mere punctuation marks in the onward march of our everyday life.

What then of our “gigantic secret?” What then of our deeply faithful capacity for celebration? We, the people of faith, are the ones, if Chesterton is correct, who know real joy, real celebration, and who can feel its profound invitational summons. Can we taste this before hand?

We can, but only if we know how to test for it. Test for it? A taste test for a capacity for the gigantic secret? What might that look like?

Hans Küng is perhaps known to many of you. A German professor of theology and a Roman Catholic, Küng has over many decades battled the power structures of the Roman Catholic Church and run afoul of papal authority. In a series of scholarly books—ranging through the academic disciplines from history, sociology, psychology and on through New Testament studies, to Systematic and then Historical Theology— Küng has been a powerful, distinctive, and insistent voice for reform and for hope.

In 2001, anticipating the end of the papacy of John Paul II, he wrote a simple little book intended for wide lay reading. He abandoned his usual scholarly style and without footnotes or references he wrote with disarming simplicity. He called this book, The Catholic Church: A Short History. It is a marvelously readable history of the broad church and a keen analysis of Christianity in its many forms, its relationships both within itself and across to other world religions. Behind all its winsomeness, however, Küng inexorably mounts a case: a case for the people of the church, their needs and longings and gifts, for the heart of the Gospel, and against the structures of hierarchical power which, he argues as ever, stultify, threaten, and even destroy the Gospel. Küng is nothing if not persistently and courageously consistent! Let me read briefly from his “Conclusion”:

For forty years now, problems have been suppressed, abuses covered up, reforms prevented, all opposition suppressed ... Outwardly the whole wretched situation has been masked by demonstrations of power and pomp ... If the Catholic Church is to be saved from this deep crisis, then the next conclave must bring to us a pope who returns to the course of renewal begun by the Second Vatican Council.

Now, you may well be wondering: what is Miller talking about? What has Geneva to do with Rome? What do Charlotte Presbyterians have to do with European Roman Catholics? What does all this have to do with our celebration of children and families? Be patient, bear with me, and listen.

Küng for all his brilliance and bravery, waits for a structural solution to the crisis: the elevation of a different kind of pope, which did not happen; the consecration of a new kind of bishop, which is not happening. It would be as if Martin Luther had longed only for the creation of a new Committee or been satisfied with an appointment to a Task Force. Luther knew something else, and in knowing this he caused the Reformation. Luther knew what was needed was a change, not of structure in the church, but spirit in the heart! [To be fair: Küng knows this.]

You remember our Old Testament reading? Perhaps not. Let me remind you: it is a story of spies; of fear and cowardice, on the one hand, and of conviction and courage, on the other hand. It is a story which made all the difference to Israel. It is the story of the great step, the step that takes the people of God to where God intends them to be.

When the people of Israel stepped out of their slave houses in Egypt and entered the desert, they were not yet where God intended them to be.

When the people of Israel stepped into the muddy bottom of the Red Sea, then onto the far shore, they were not yet where God intended them to be.

When the people of Israel stepped forward at the foot of Sinai to receive the Torah of God, they were not yet where God intended them to be.

When the people of Israel stepped forward in worship within the Tabernacle, they were not yet where God intended them to be.

When the spies returned from their expedition into the Promised Land and the people of Israel stepped forward to hear their report, they were even then not yet where God intended them to be.

To get to that special place of God's intention, they had to step over the Jordan, step out of the desert, step beyond their past so imprisoned by the scope of their own vision, so captured and conditioned by their own hopes. They had to step forward into the expansive future God intended for them; they had to step forward into the Promised Land.

But, they were reluctant to take that step! The land the spies told them of was full of enemies. When Abraham had entered it so long before, we read ominously in Genesis 12:6, "The Canaanites were then in the land." Archaeological scholarship has shown us that these people, native to the land, were a highly developed civilization, living in walled cities, with professional armies. And there they still were: the "descendants of Anak:" the Amalekites, the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites, and the Canaanites. These were serious foes for a shepherd people of former slaves; serious enough to call in question their entire notion of being God's chosen people. Better to conform than confront! Better comfort than conflict!

The Promised Land is never empty; it is no mere glossy gift to take, unwrap, use and enjoy. It is a deep promise to seize and to create. To get where God intends his people to be requires courage, struggle, and conflict with his foes.

The people of Israel were wilting at the prospect. They hesitated to take the next step.

The spies had anticipated this. They knew their own. And so, with them from the land they had spied out, back to the people who had spent a generation in the desert, they brought—a "cluster of grapes;" a taste, a glimpse, a hint, of the fullness of life with God in the place he intended them to be.

The cluster of grapes is the promise of joy unbounded when we live where God intends us to be. It can take many forms.

"Were not all ten cleansed?" Jesus asked the one who returned and fell at his feet. We know that all ten were! Luke tells us so. "As they went, they were cleansed." [Luke 17:14] What Jesus really means, I think is: Why did not all ten return? Why did only one take the step: the step back to me; the step of joy unbounded; the step of celebration?

The nine, of course, were simply doing what Jesus had told them: "Go, show yourselves to the priests." [Luke 17: 14] We have to remember that a leper in that society was more than someone

who was ill. The nature of the illness created huge fear in the community and so there were strict laws barring lepers from any contact with others. They were sick, yes, but they were also isolated outcasts. In order to return to society they needed a proof of cure. This was in the form of a certificate issued by the priests.

The nine who did not return were Jews. They needed that certificate. They were bound by it; by the rules; by the committee structure of Judaism, if I can put it that way. The one who returned, Luke explicitly tells us [Luke 17:16] was a Samaritan. He had no need of a Jewish priest's certificate; he had no need to follow the rules; he had no need of the committee structure. He was cleansed; he knew it; and his heart burst with love, joy, and gratitude; he ran back to Jesus to celebrate his new life! When "he threw himself at Jesus' feet" [Luke 17:16] he took the step. He stepped forward in celebration to be where God intended him to be. He stepped forward to taste the cluster of grapes!

Faithful, celebration is three things: all needed; each demanding.

Faithful celebration is satisfied with God's promise and does not need to meet the world's measure of success. All the people of Israel needed to do was trust the promise of the cluster of grapes. Trusting that, they stepped forward into God's future for them. We in the church perhaps sometimes are tempted to despair by our community service work, our mission trips, and our best intended efforts to help. We have been at all this for so long and yet remain in triage mode. Despair not! The witness itself is tasting the grapes. Better yet, the witness is offering them to others.

More than this, though, and perhaps more of a challenge for us is this: faithful celebration is an abandonment of rule obedience; a giving up on structural solutions; setting aside the naïve belief that if we only had a special committee we would be so much more faithful in our service. The Samaritan spontaneously, personally, individually, and without any regard to what others thought of him, ran back and fell at Jesus' feet with a heart bursting with joy. With such a heart, and with such a response, each of us can take the only step needed. Without such a heart and response, with no individual ache of joy, no structure can do any good whatsoever. We can never have a committee of celebration!

Thus, finally, faithful celebration is an invitational summons. Each one of us as we celebrate is invited to continue and never give up. There is little else so important in the life of faith. In turn, all of us as we celebrate invite the world around us to wonder, to follow the lure of our joy, and in following find for themselves the Lord of life.

This, faithful celebration, is our "gigantic secret."

[Soli Deo Gloria]