

Lucia Lloyd's sermon  
October 9, 2011, Year A  
Matthew 22:1-14  
Philippians 4:1-9

All of us have things in our lives that are mean or scary. So this morning I brought in a cartoon from *The Far Side*. This cartoon shows a guy right in the middle of hell. You can see the flames all around him. In the picture there are two demons, and a demon is about as mean and evil and scary as it gets. The guy is pushing his wheelbarrow past these demons, and while he pushes his wheelbarrow, what is he doing? He is happily whistling a tune! And the demon says, "You know, we're just not reaching that guy."

Martin Luther said that the best way to drive out the devil is to laugh at him, because the devil can't stand to be laughed at.

This morning's reading from Philippians tells us "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, rejoice!" Don't just rejoice when everything happens to be going well. Even when things are mean or evil or scary, rejoice! Even when you are walking right in front of demons, be like the guy in this cartoon and rejoice, and that way the demons just won't reach you.

When things are mean or evil or scary, today's Bible verses from Philippians tell us what to do:

Pray for what you want

Thank God

Think about good things

Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say rejoice!

For me, going off to seminary was a pretty intense experience in the first place. And then, just after my first semester, while I was on Christmas vacation, I got the news that I had been diagnosed with cancer. I went through surgery in the January term, and then during the spring semester I went back to classes while I also had chemotherapy every two weeks. I was tired, I was nauseated, and I was bald. I did not know whether I would be one of the many women who go through treatments and lead a long and healthy

life, or whether I would be one of the many women who go through treatments and die young. I was 36 years old. My children were four years old and two years old. It was a much more intense theological education than I'd bargained for.

There were a lot of times when what I needed was to have a good cry, and to have friends who were willing to keep me company in my sadness without trying to fix it. There were other times when I needed to focus on something other than my own problems. There was one Thursday in February which was shortly after my chemo infusion when I was feeling my worst. My friend Lonnie and his fiancée Jessica were engaged to be married, and my dormmates had organized a wedding shower for the two of them that evening. I thought I probably wouldn't go to the shower. But I decided to get a present for him and his fiancée. So I drove over to Pier One and found, at a price I could afford, some margarita glasses. While I was there, I even got a few to give to my husband for his birthday. And then once I'd bought the present, I decided that even though I didn't really feel like it, I didn't want to miss his wedding shower. It turned out to be a delightful shower, full of love and fun and friendship.

It is now almost eight years since my diagnosis, and it looks like I am going to be one of the women who lives a long and healthy life. So when I look back, I am glad I went to that wedding shower to rejoice with my friend. And I think that if I had been one of the women who died young, I would have been even more glad that I went to that wedding shower to rejoice with my friend.

It may seem odd to talk about parties with friends when times are tough. But when times are tough is often when we need parties with our friends the most.

And Jesus tells us that in the midst of all the suffering of human life, the kingdom of heaven is like a party. You are invited. It is a big party. A wedding banquet.

Jesus has a lot of different ways of describing the kingdom of heaven, but he describes it as a party more often than any other way. And the thing I love about that is that when you invite your friends and loved ones to a party, it is not because you want them to do something for you; it is simply because you want to share your happiness with them. What makes you happy is just the simple pleasure of having people you love with you. It is like those moments when you sit across a table from a dear friend and say, "I

am so glad you are here.” And as you say it, you know that it is not just a conventional pleasantry, it is a deep truth.

Jesus says to us: you are invited to the party. I want to share my happiness with you. And whenever we accept that invitation, whether it is with the community in worship or in our own personal prayer, Jesus looks at us with the delight of a dear friend and says, “I am so glad you are here.”

One of the things I love about the Church in general and the Episcopal Church in particular is that there are so many celebrations! Every Sunday when we gather around this table, we have a celebration of love and thanksgiving and communion. We might not worship God by drinking margaritas, but we do worship God by drinking wine. Our Eucharistic feast each Sunday is a little foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which we will feast in eternity. It is a good and joyful thing! This congregation takes that spirit of celebration into lots of other times and places too.

In today’s parable from Matthew 22, Jesus talks about the king telling his servants, “Go into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” This congregation at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church has a real spiritual gift for serving God by inviting and welcoming people to God’s party. The newcomers who have been coming here to St. Stephen’s Episcopal lately have all told me that you have made them feel very welcome in this faith community. Your mission is to be “a welcoming family,” and it shows.

This has been true from even before I arrived here. Before my installation, I met individually with Bishop Johnston. In that meeting, he said I could ask the wardens if they had any “talking points” they wanted him to mention in his remarks at the celebration. So I dutifully asked the wardens, and their response was, “No, we don’t want to send the bishop talking points. Send him a copy of our mission and vision instead!” I thought that was a great idea! The e-mail I got from the bishop’s office in response said, “I am especially happy to have the vision statement. It is truly exceptional, and I wish everyone had one as meaningful!” Even the bishop loves your emphasis on welcome.

This congregation also names inclusiveness as a quality that is at the core of your identity. Like the servants in Jesus’ parable, you serve by inviting *everyone* to the party. The king makes it clear to his servants that they are to invite *everyone* they find on the

streets, both good and bad, to come to the party. William Sloane Coffin once said that every parable Jesus tells is about either inclusiveness or forgiveness, one or the other. As I read the gospels, there are a few more topics Jesus mentions, but for the most part William Sloane Coffin is right: the parables are about inclusiveness and forgiveness.

When people think of God's commands, they often think of them as burdens. But in today's scriptures, what God commands us to do is:

Party, party, party!

Welcome, welcome, welcome!

Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice!

Alleluia!