

It's a Celebration!  
September 11, 2016  
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

“Life is a banquet and most poor fools are starving to death!” That is a slightly edited quote from Patrick Dennis’s *Auntie Mame*. In this book turned screenplay, the young Patrick Dennis is orphaned and sent to live with his eccentric Aunt Mame. She leads a colorful life, but she can certainly afford to do that. That is, until the stock market crash in 1929. Mame suffers all kinds of loss, but never veers from the notion that life is a celebration. Young Patrick asks how she can remain so happy in the midst of loss. That is when she makes the famous “banquet” statement.

In today’s gospel, we hear two stories of loss followed by celebration. First, a lamb wanders off. The shepherd does the unthinkable. He goes to find the lost sheep while the 99 are left unattended. Upon finding the one, he carries it back as he leads the other sheep back to the sheepfold for the night. This is followed by a celebration. I have to wonder what sort of meat dish was served at the party. Could it have been lamb?

Then, a woman with ten coins finds that one is missing. She becomes absolutely frantic. She looks everywhere. Finally, she moves all the furniture and sweeps out the whole place. Upon finding the coin, she goes and tells all her friends and then throws a party. One has to wonder if the party did not cost more than the value of the coin she found.

Jesus did not tell these stories because they were to make logical sense. He told them to make a point. As one looks at the stories from all sides, there are several points that can be drawn. It can be about God rejoicing when someone turns back to follow the creator. It can also be about a way of looking at the world that says, difficulties come and go, but when we count the blessings we have been given, even in the midst of adversity, all we can rightly do is celebrate.

We are beginning a new program year together. We have lots of opportunities just beginning again. There are opportunities to worship the Triune God. Children, youth, and adults have multiple avenues for learning about our faith and growing in our spirituality. Our younger children have received story books that will teach them the great stories of the faith. Our third graders have received Bibles to use as they grow in faith and study their Christian past. There are untold ways to reach out to others in ministry together with works of mercy and justice. We also have the chance to grow together as a community of faith as we continue to live together in Christian community. We always begin the year with a sense of anticipation. Today, as we so often do, we begin with a shared meal. Where would we United Methodists be without brunch?

In the Timothy reading, the writer talks about blessings received even while he was working against the people of God. He recognized that Christ came into the world to save sinners and recognized himself as one of the worst of the sinners. Even still, he has been offered the kingdom. If he, with all of his problems, could be lifted up by God, certainly we also are lifted up. It is a reason to celebrate.

We have to hold all of life in a balance. That balance is a holding of things in tension together. Over the past eight weeks I have challenged you to look at the world differently. I have challenged you to reach out in new ways. I have challenged you to be truly Wesleyan Christians. I know this has been met by some with a feeling of, "I just can't do any more." I want to share with you something I found on a blog this week. The article is entitled, "I'm Done: Why I'm Walking Away from Church, Ministry, and Most Everything 'Christian'". This is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but like much of that type of writing, holds great truth.

I promise, it's not you, it's me.

That, I'm convinced.

I've tried, I really have. Twenty-two years of ministry—even more time, simply being a "Christian."

I can't do it, and it's high time to call the wizard out from behind the curtain.

This whole American-Christianity thing, I'm just not good enough. I can't pull it off.

Church, ministry, "Christian" stuff—I simply don't have what it takes.

**I mean, you Church folks are amazing, I don't know how you do it.** The way you keep your righteousness and closeness with God afloat through a vigilant life of sin-management, do-gooding, and Christian faithfulness, I can't even begin to lift that kind of weight, let alone hold it up. For me, every time I'm admonished with things I need to do in order to be a better person or become a more "fully devoted" follower of Jesus Christ, I don't even get close to mastering just one of them, not to mention the five others listed in the sermon notes. And before you know it, the next Sunday, we're on to a whole new set of things I need to go after. Honestly, I just can't keep up like you. I'm so far behind from being a "real deal Christian." And quite frankly, I'm ashamed of my incapacity to spiritually perform at your level. I truly don't know how you field that kind of pressure and keep good going with all the spiritual consequences ahead of you if you don't. Your fear management skills must be impeccable.<sup>1</sup>

I know that there are some weeks when I press pretty hard. The needs are so great and our need to connect with God is even greater. At the same time, the world, our jobs, our families, the difficulties with which we deal, pull us in other directions. I worry that my challenges do not inspire you forward, but, rather, cause you to shut down.

Then we return to the scriptures. Psalm 100: "O be joyful in the Lord, all the earth."  
Psalm 47: "Clap your hands, all you people." Philippians 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always.  
I'll say it again, rejoice!"

I got an email from someone who visited a few weeks ago. After thanking me for the hospitality shown by the people here, it went on to criticize us, based on our website. At first, I was hurt by the criticism. I always am. But then, I began to think, as I always do. This is a church where the word of God is proclaimed, the sacraments are celebrated, the poor are lifted up, and we are making small steps toward justice. Have we arrived? No. Are we the church? By God, yes we are!

I have good news and bad news. The good news is, this is a day of celebration. You are a child of God. I am a child of God. We have been blessed to be a blessing to others. The bad news is that we have not fully arrived. I am going to continue to push and prod. Together we will work on a vision for moving forward as a community of faith to transform the world and build God's kingdom.

A sheep wandered off and was found. Let's rejoice. A coin was lost and then was found. Let's celebrate. Life is a banquet. Let's feast. I refuse to be one of the poor fools starving to death. How about you?

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<sup>i</sup> Chris Kratzer in his blog, "Putting into Words What Only Grace is Brave Enough to Say" viewed September 10, 2016 at <http://chriskratzer.com/im-done-why-im-completely-walking-away-from-church-ministry-and-most-everything-christian/>