

God's Pleasure in Us

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The First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of the Lord
January 9, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” -- Matthew 3:17

There's a scene in the movie *Chariots of Fire* in which the Scottish missionary and runner Eric Liddell tries to explain to his sister Jenny why he needs to postpone returning to the mission field so that he can run in the Paris Olympics of 1924. “I believe that God made me for a purpose,” he says, “but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure.”

How many of us here this morning can say that we feel God's pleasure about our own lives? Do ever sense the pleasure God takes in your life – your gifts, your skills, your abilities, your capacity to enrich creation? Do you ever stop to remember that God's greatest joy is you, living in God's image as God's beloved daughter or son, as God intends all of us to live?

One of the risks we Christians have always had to live with is our Christology, that is, what we think and say and believe about Jesus the Christ. The earliest creeds of the church affirm that Christians believe Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine, at the same time, and that belief requires constant balancing, so that we don't, on the one hand, make Jesus just a nice guy – fully human – or, on the other, simply say that he's God – fully divine. Both of those positions have been considered by the broad stream of the church to be mistakes, and of the two, the latter has historically proved to be the greater temptation.

Most Christians emphasize Jesus' divinity, with the result that a passage like today's reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus' baptism, can lose much of its power, because we read the words “This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased,” to refer to Jesus and not to us, and I think that's a mistake.

We say we're all God's children, but I often wonder if that assertion is little more than empty words. If we took those words seriously, and read today's text with those words seriously in mind, how different might we feel about ourselves and others, and how differently might we act in response?

We say that God loves us -- *Jesus Loves Me* is one of the first songs many of us learned as children – but do we believe that God *likes* us, that God takes pleasure in our existence, that God is glad we're here?

I've heard many parents over the years say, “I love my teenager, but I don't really like her or him right now,” and I think that many of us probably unconsciously feel that God has that same sort of relationship with us. Love, as we Christians live it, can have a joyless quality about it, full of duty and devoid of pleasure. I love my neighbor, I just don't like him. I love the person down the pew, but I don't really care for her. If she were in trouble and needed my help, I'd help her because that's my Christian duty, but I probably wouldn't enjoy it.

We do our duty as Christians – we take up our cross and follow Jesus when we have to – but when it comes to the things of joy and pleasure in life, our lives of faith seem to

get set aside. I think that's one of the reasons we often speak of "guilty pleasures." Sadly, for too many of us, most pleasures seem to carry some burden of guilt.

And to live this way, it seems to me, is to miss a great deal of the Christian faith. Yes, absolutely the life of faith is about sacrifice. Yes, it's about duty. Yes, it's about self-denial. Yes, it's serious.

But no, it's not grim. No, it's not about self-loathing or self-neglect. No, it's not about being punished, either by yourself or by God. The Christian faith, when all is said and done, is about joy – the joy that comes from a rightly ordered life based on rightly ordered loves.

"I have said these things to you," Jesus said to his followers, "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." The living presence of Jesus Christ in our lives is meant to be a source of joy – joy for us, joy for others, joy for creation.

"I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart" we used to sing in the Baptist church, and I miss some of those joyful, uplifting, positive, energetic, life-affirming gospel hymns and praise choruses. We've got a few of them in our hymnal, thank goodness -- "I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me" is one from the African-American tradition, and "We're Marching to Zion" is one that we occasionally sing here. I wouldn't want those to be the only sort of hymn we sing in this church, but we certainly could do much worse than sing "Love Lifted Me," a great old hymn about the transforming power of love in a human life. One of the reasons I have us sing "He Lives!" on Easter morning is because of the energy and the joy and just plain old fun of singing it, of whooping it up for Jesus. Done in the right spirit and with the proper performance practice, those old and sometimes young gospel hymns have tremendous power to lift spirits, energize worship, and send us from this place better able to do what we came here for in the first place.

Life is a beautiful, gorgeous, wonderful, mysterious, breath-taking, heart-stopping and sometimes, yes, let's admit it, heart-breaking gift. And the fact that God has given you – given all of us – that gift is the first and surest sign of God's pleasure in us. Because God didn't have to give it to us. Does anybody ever really grasp the significance of their own life – the astonishing fact that they have one? The fact that there is no necessary reason for any of us to be here, for anything at all to be here?

We take life for granted, as a given – there was a bang and everything just evolved from there – and that, it seems to me, is the most corrosive and destructive of all the ways to interpret modern science. All of this stuff just happened. It was inevitable that it would happen, given enough swirling atoms and eons of time.

No, actually, it wasn't inevitable, and this is where I plant the flag of religion against this interpretation of modern science. There is nothing inevitable about creation; it didn't just have to happen. It happened because of God's grace, because it didn't have to happen at all. There could be nothing instead of something and we got – and are part of – the something. That's God's gift to us, and what we do with that something – the something that is us, the something that is our neighbors, the something that is the unfolding creation – that is our gift to God.

And the possibilities are endless! That's what's so wonderful about the life of faith. The possibilities of making something beautiful for God out of all of that stuff are simply endless. You'll never run out of options – what a marvelous way to live! And we humans seem to be the only species on the planet that recognizes possibility. We don't simply see food and eat it; we see the possibility of sharing it, of increasing it, of modifying it. We were made for possibility. You were made, I was made, all of us were made for the possibility that is life. We were not made for the tragedy, and there's plenty of that, and we Christians don't deny the tragedy. But what we affirm is that we were made for the possibility. That's what we mean when we speak of God's will – that you and I and

everything else in all creation is here for possibility and not for tragedy. We don't know what all those possibilities are – no one has a crystal ball – but we do know that they're not tragedies, and it is precisely our ability to distinguish the one from the other that reveals to us that there is purposefulness in the universe – God's will, in other words – and that that purposefulness is benign.

God loves you, to be sure, but that love has shape and form and content and design. In the morning we call it sunrise, in the evening we call it dusk, and when we're tired we call it sleep. When it's red and juicy and sweet we call it an apple, and when it's pink and soft and looks like us we call it a baby. When it discloses our longing to be together we call it a love letter, and when it flies wirelessly as bits and bytes, we call it email.

It's all here, it's all ours, and it's all waiting to be put to the loving purposes of God. The song is right: life *is* a cabaret, whose emcee is God, and the invitations have been sent – sent to Marilyn and Sue and Don and Kathy and Amy and Bill and Dave. The proof that you are God's beloved child is your presence in this world, and that's all the proof any of us needs to know that with us God is well pleased.