

A Lesson in Celebration

Sunday, July 11, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

2 Samuel 6:12 -19 (See also a fuller account of this event in 1 Chronicles, 13, 15 & 16:1-6)

It was told King David, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. They brought in the ark of the Lord, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the Lord. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

It has long been my conviction that we don't celebrate enough. As a Church we do rather well, as celebration is an essential purpose of the Church, but as individuals and families I am convinced that there is much room for improvement. We own large homes with patios, large living rooms and guest rooms, and when purchasing our homes we even speak of how well suited they may be for entertaining— and then we never get around to entertaining. Planning and hosting a celebration just seems like too much work and worry, so we become lax in this aspect of our lives. We could all benefit from a lesson in celebration, and what better instructor could we find for this lesson than David. His carefully planned celebration of the Ark of the Covenant's move to Jerusalem serves as a priceless example of a true celebration and all that is involved.

Perhaps a word of explanation is in order before we begin. Not all are equally gifted in matters of hospitality and of planning, and for a number of reasons many are not able to host gatherings and events. But before we gather all our excuses and reasons that this message does not apply to us, I urge you all to consider how we can grow in this skill and understanding. I am reminded of high school when I read an essay by Emerson on gifts, and Mr. Emerson went into great detail about what makes a gift truly valuable and appropriate and what we should consider as we give gifts. I found the whole thing nosey and intrusive. Who is he to tell me that my gifts are good or bad? We have many diverse understandings and traditions surrounding gift giving and how we celebrate, and I do not wish to offend these personal expressions of love, but with that understanding, let us consider some wise input from a master of celebration—David.

It all begins with the ability to **recognize that which is worthy of celebration**. Our Old Testament passage tells of David's bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and this was an event which David wisely recognized as of the greatest importance. In recent years David had captured Jerusalem and claimed it as his own. Astutely he realized that this was an ideal capital as it stood between the rival factions of Israel: The large tribe of Judah and the remaining northern tribes were not accustomed to thinking of themselves as parts of one unified nation. David saw Jerusalem's potential. He envisioned a palace and a Temple and knew that moving the ark to Jerusalem was a big step toward realizing these dreams. He had tried moving the ark of God earlier, but that attempt ended badly as the priests were negligent in their treatment of the ark, and God's judgment fell upon them on that day. The ark was left at the home of Obad-Edom. David and the Israelites were shaken by the event, but in time Obad-Edom began to prosper, and it seemed obvious that God was now pouring out blessing and not punishment. So David tried again, this time properly moving the ark, and doing all with great celebration.

David had the eyes to see that the moment had arrived! *So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obad-Edom to the City of David **with much rejoicing**.* Saul had no interest in the ark. David was keenly aware of the ark and its central significance to the worship life of Israel. This was the great symbolic presence of God among the Israelites which would someday become the central item of the great Temple. Not only did David see the importance of moving the ark, but he saw the importance of doing so as a celebration. He could have quietly moved the ark, but instead chose to make that day one of rejoicing for the whole nation. David "pulled all the stops" for that celebration as hundreds of cattle were slaughtered as sacrifices and for feasting, countless priests paraded, sang and played instruments, and all of Israel was invited to rejoice. Generous gifts were given. David recognized that this was a day worth celebrating!

This great saint's witness presents us all with the question: what should we be celebrating? One should not have to look far to find things worthy of a party. Our marriages and families (and we need not wait until special anniversaries) are always worth a time of rejoicing. Most families are long overdue for a real family reunion where relatives close and distant can get reacquainted. Are we appropriately celebrating our young people? Garrison Keillor observantly spoke of parents who were deeply proud of their children, but very careful to keep them from ever knowing this! (We don't want them to become vain and proud!) Baptisms, graduations, and confirmations are milestones worth a celebration. We should also celebrate the Lord's deliverances and rescues in our lives. David was keenly aware of the many times that God had brought him through dangerous situations. Certainly, you remember times when you said, "Lord if you will only get me through this mess I will be so grateful." Have you gathered a celebration to honor God's answer to your prayer, or did you simply move on with life? I have come to deeply appreciate birthday parties. Some find it all silly as such an annual milestone seems an artificial cause for celebration, but I disagree. This came home to me after our son was diagnosed with leukemia. He was soon on a positive path to healing and life was surprisingly normal, even in the middle of his harsher treatments, but I remember being greatly taken aback by our son David's first birthday which came after his illness began. It became plain to me that a birthday, the gift of another year on this earth, are not "a gimme," but are a precious gift of grace. This has deepened my understanding of a birthday's significance. It is a golden opportunity to thank God and be grateful for what is truly a gift.

David could recognize the appropriate time to celebrate, and he also knew how to do it **with feeling!** *David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.* David danced before the Lord with all his might, and this was not for show. This was the expression of a bold faith and a heart of gratitude. The king looked back, fully remembering the many deliverances God had worked in his life to bring him safely to this point. He looked ahead to a great city and nation which would be specially blessed by God. He delighted in the moment, for life was good! Not all agreed. His wife Michal, daughter of Saul, was not pleased with David's exuberant display, and it appears that her greatest objection was that she found it all in bad taste and not fitting for his social status. But David was not about to be caught up in her drama. He simply recognized that she was wrong and kept on dancing.

{You will be blessed to look up on YouTube the Duke Ellington Band's rendition of "David Danced Before the Lord With All His Might," featuring the dancing of Bunny Briggs! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVZ9WnUyf9k> }

Oh, that we could have the exuberance of David! We are not likely to become expressive dancers any time soon, however, there are definite steps we can be taking toward a healthier life of celebration. First of all, let us commit ourselves to not being slaves to unreasonable expectations and checklists. Many, particularly women, come to despise special celebrations as they feel obligated to honor every imaginable tradition and expectation surrounding an event. Celebrations become a long list of things to do and fears of missing something, and these supposed times of celebration often end with an exhausted sense of “thank goodness that’s over.” Some years ago, I spoke of Thanksgiving as a more relaxed family holiday, and nearly had my car tires slashed by a mob of angry women. “You have no idea how hard it is to put on such a feast!” was the protest. Like a noble fool I am not backing down on this one. If family expectation has risen so high that hosting a celebration is a terrible burden, then it is time to go on strike. Put together a feast which is manageable, and if anyone objects, then let them be in charge of perpetuating whatever tradition they fear has been forsaken. Don’t let Martha Stewart define the success or failure of your gathering. Let your celebrations be motivated and guided by joy and not other’s expectations.

Be sure to celebrate at your celebrations. Showing up is an important start, but having done that, try to keep the celebration on track. If the celebration is for a confirmation or a baptism, take some time to think of God’s faithfulness and of this young person’s walk with God. Offer a word of thanks and thought. A family reunion is a time to share family memories, so be sure to contribute to (but don’t dominate) the conversation. At a birthday, be sure to think about the year past and what lies ahead. Be sentimental if you please. Celebrations are a time when that is generally excused so go ahead and indulge. While I cannot and will not deny my Germanic roots, I also believe that we occasionally need to be a little more Italian. Those folks impress me with their expressiveness. While we would only think and not say such things, a good Italian parent would say without hesitation, “This is my daughter! Isn’t she beautiful? Smart too!” I like that, and I believe that God likes that too.

Be sure to keep celebrations positive. That sounds so obvious, but we can lose touch with this important point. How many times do we hear of celebrations being marred by ugly political arguments, or we may fear having to sit next to some poor-soul relation who only knows how to spill out all their troubles. There are times and places for such negativity, but not at a party. You may be convinced that the world is falling apart as we speak, and may have good reason for believing so, but don’t take that to a celebration. Be positive. My mother was not big on family celebrations and special events and her uneasiness about such occasions went back to her childhood. My grandmother, the family raving neurotic, made sure on each of my mother’s birthdays to spend the day calling each of her friends and recounting in detail “how I almost died giving birth to Charlotte!” We can all find a way to do better than my grandmother, but are we all remembering to bring a gift of joy and gratitude to share at each celebration? Let us be deliberately positive in our celebrations.

Finally, let us be **generous and outreaching** in our celebrations. When we discuss the hosting of an event someone will always chime in, “But don’t you know the cost of food these days?” Hosting can be expensive. David knew this, but regardless of the cost he hosted a grand affair there in Jerusalem. This was a time to splurge! Celebration can be a type of worship, and we are not to be stingy in our faith. (Interestingly, we live in a day when we generally don’t celebrate enough, often citing the cost, time and effort required, yet our weddings keep growing into bigger and bigger affairs. I will leave that discussion to another time and place.) Celebrations can be an opportunity to show generosity. There in Jerusalem hundreds of cattle were sacrificed so there was food for all who gathered. And if this were not enough, we read of other gifts of food freely given. No one went away hungry!

It is also noteworthy that *all* were invited. *Everybody* got blessed and fed. Many who gathered were delighted that the ark was coming to find its home in Jerusalem, and perhaps just as many gave little or no thought to the actual goings-on of that day. David was not concerned with making this a gathering of only the true believers. *All* were invited and all were recipients of his generosity, and if they did not understand the significance of the event, he hoped that a witness of such generosity would make them reflect and discover its meaning at a later time. Granted, we cannot invite the whole world to our celebrations, but there is a real lesson for us all in David’s open invitations. How sad that so many of our celebrations become exclusively “family” celebrations, and by family we mean immediate blood relations and no one else. It is good for such family ties to be strong, but can they be too strong to the neglect of others? When I was in Ohio I once asked a dear elderly member if they knew someone who was seated at the opposite end of the sanctuary, and their answer stunned me. “No. They are not one of my people.” That is an expression which I don’t hear often in this area, and I knew what this person meant. They were telling me that this person was not related to them nor a part of their social ties, and no unkindness was intended, but it is a manner of speaking which should be deeply offensive to Christians. *All* who call on the name of Christ are “our people,” drawn together by the strongest of family ties - the blood of Christ! And if a person is not yet a believer let us count them as family just the same. For Christians to be exclusively absorbed in their own immediate families is a tragedy. Can we open our families just a little more? Can we make room for just a few more people at our table? Can we be more conscious of those we can be bringing into our families? What a joy it is to accumulate extra brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, who may not be actual blood relations, but are still very much family. And what a witness this is to how Christ has invited us into God’s family.

In recent years I have met a few folks who make a living as “event planners.” Hiring such an organizer is an expense which most of us cannot afford, and I have also come to learn that such planners do not necessarily make hosting an event trouble free. Celebrations involve some real work and planning, but let us not be afraid of a little

effort, and let us not feel the need for professional advice. Let us embrace David as our event planner and consider his wisdom in our future festivities. He might even teach us a few new dance steps.