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Luke 7:36-50  
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### Grateful and Festive<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest privileges I have as pastor is to officiate at weddings. Being that these special occasions ideally only happen once in our lifetime. The people who gather to witness these two people exchanging their vows will never get together again in that way. It's a very unique event.

Right after the welcome I tell the congregation how Jesus often talked about weddings through the stories he told. He likened these events to the kingdom of heaven drawing near.

So I invite the bride and the groom to turn around, feast upon the sights, and to soak it all in because the events of the day go so fast. As we pause, they see the family and friends who have gathered to cheer them on in the journey together. They check out the decorations, anticipate the food that will be eaten and think about the dancing and fun that will be had over the next several hours.

It's as if, for a just brief moment, we are all invited into the kingdom of heaven. To get a foretaste of what heaven is like. It's a very special moment for everyone.

There was one wedding, however, where one crucial person refused to enter into the joy of the moment. She didn't approve of the union. And though she was physically present, her hard heart prevented her from experiencing the kingdom of heaven that had broken into our midst. The rest of us were grateful and festive.

She, however, was grumbly and missed out.

So sad, her choice.

Today, we continue our learning about gratitude and we turn to a story in the Gospel of Luke 7:36-50 where a feast was taking place. Jesus was at the home of a Pharisee for dinner when a "sinful" woman...we don't know exactly what that means...crashed the party and showed her gratitude in a way that made the other guests feel extremely uncomfortable.

In a nutshell, one person experienced the kingdom of heaven and expressed their gratitude with tremendous sacrifice. Another had a very judgmental and closed heart to God's ways...and so missed out on the privilege of having Jesus around them.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

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<sup>1</sup> This series is largely influenced by two books, Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018) and Janice Kaplan, *The Gratitude Diaries: How a Year Looking on the Bright Side Can Transform Your Life* (NY: Penguin Random House Publishers, 2015).

I picked this story today to serve as a lens to look through as we consider how gratitude and celebration often go hand in hand. Though the story doesn't necessarily state that a party was taking place at the Pharisee's home, we can pretty much infer that wherever and whenever Jesus is present, there is a party! What we do know is that other guests were present at this meal.

Jews were especially fond of social feasting and had a certain protocol to welcome their guests. This meant the host would provide a robe for their guests, welcome them with a kiss, wash their feet, anoint them with oil, decorate their heads and necks with garlands, seat them according to social rank, and finally offer prayers. For a host to break this routine would have been an offense.

In this story, we see the stark contrast between the hospitality provided to Jesus by the Pharisee on one hand and this "sinful" woman on the other. No doubt her actions must have caught everyone off guard. She broke into the party of which she was clearly not invited. She singled Jesus out of the crowd. She purposefully brought a very expensive jar of perfume which most likely would have been a dowry that she had been saving for the day of her wedding. She broke it open. Came up to Jesus where he was reclining. Wiped his feet with her tears and her hair. And then began anointing Jesus' feet with this perfume.

I'm uncomfortable just mentioning it. So we can imagine that those who witnessed this were clearly uncomfortable with the depth of her devotion.

The Pharisee made judgements against her character silently to himself, but Jesus who knows all things regarding our hearts, called him out for his very offensive lack of hospitality.

"Dude, don't be thinking that.

This is your house and yet you didn't wash my feet. You didn't give me a kiss. You didn't anoint my head and feet with oil. You didn't even put a garland around my neck.

But she welcomed me as if she were the hostess of this party. Look at her gratitude for what I have done on her behalf. She will most definitely join in this party.

You sir, however, will not and should be thrown outside where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So sad, your choice!"

What this story shows is that gratitude is a matter of the heart that comes down to a choice that we must make. Will we enter the party or not?

Diana Butler Bass in her book, *Grateful, The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, suggests that we can cultivate a heart of gratitude simply by joining in the festivities that happen all around us. Community Festivals. Holidays. Moments

of playfulness. The Lord's Supper. And finally politics...yes you heard that one right...even our politics in America can cultivate a heart of gratitude within us.

There is something about community festivals that are so exciting. As a kid, I remember spending entire days at the carnival that our church held for our community. Getting drunk off the spirit and excitement of it all. Running around with friends, taking ride after ride. Playing games and lugging giant stuffed animals around. Eating delicious food that should kill you. Hearing the music of laughter. Watching fireworks. Staying up way too late. Going home absolutely exhausted. And then doing it all over again the next day. In those moments, we would think to ourself, "It just didn't get any better than this Life is just as it should be!"<sup>2</sup>

I'm certain that if Jesus were to tell a parable today, he would begin by saying "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a carnival that came to town..."

Diana Butler Bass states that "festivity is central to joy." And joy is critical in cultivating a heart of gratitude.

Other events that cultivate festive feelings are holidays. We are about to step into the holiday season beginning with Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For me, the joy begins weeks before as I begin to anticipate our children returning home from college or Karen's parents making the trip down from Seattle. At the Montovino house the Kingdom of Heaven arrives when we are all present and enjoying life together. These moments are about feasting, celebrating traditions, playing games, watching favorite movies, laughing, and just being together.

One of our new favorite Thanksgiving traditions is to join in our community's 3.2 mile Turkey Trot. It is so much fun to connect with friends and neighbors, do something healthy, and enjoy a sense of community. Then we go home, turn on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as we begin preparing food together. Later that day, we eat together, ideally in courses so we can linger around the table with those we love. We play dominos. We have dessert. We resist the urge to go bargain shopping. Instead the day is about enjoying the favor of each person.

I think Karen would agree it is during these times when we feel like our hearts are about to explode with gratitude to God. Because God has been so kind to us!

In ancient Israel Jews celebrated three main holidays for giving thanks. There was Passover, Pentecost, and the Festival of Booths. Jews traveled to Jerusalem for each festival, leaving behind the work and responsibilities of home and village. This physical separation created an alternative space for celebration, a place at which they could arrive, as the scripture instructs "empty-handed," so that God might fill their hands with gifts."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass writes "Festivals are a microcosm of how life should be." in *Grateful*, 113.

<sup>3</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 112.

These were opportunities to celebrate God’s good gifts of freedom and abundance. They were also very different forms of celebration than those of the pagans that surrounded them who gave gifts to their gods in order to appease them so the gods might send rain, abundant harvests, or military victories in return...or not. But with Israel, their God blessed them with gifts and in return they were to humbly offer their gratitude with sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise.

Then there are moments of playfulness. We don’t see much of Jesus’ playfulness captured in the scriptures, but I imagine that he was an incredibly fun person to be around. I wonder what games he and his disciples played as they traveled along together.

I think Phil Hickok would agree that sporting events, especially Seahawk football games, bring out the playfulness in us. We have opportunity to step outside the burdens and responsibility of our world for a brief moment in order to enter into another joyful reality. If you’ve ever watched a Seahawk game with Phil you know that it is nearly a religious experience. When all is well with his Seahawks, he will “Shout for joy to the Lord before all the earth!” And the entire earth, will hear him!

“In America, the first Thanksgiving football game was played on November 30 [my birthday] in 1873 [not my birth year], when Princeton and Yale faced one another in Hoboken, New Jersey.” It was such a success that the game was later moved to New York City and accompanied by a massive parade on Broadway complete with tailgating. The first Thanksgiving Day Parade was an opportunity to show gratitude to God’s great gifts of harvest and football.<sup>4</sup> It was not about getting us to go shopping later in the day.

“A recent academic study discovered that athletes with a sense of gratitude had a higher sense of personal well-being and team satisfaction. ‘Grateful athletes are more satisfied with their team and overall lives.’ The more thankful a player is for training, mentors, and other players, the more supported and successful the player feels. This support, in turn, builds persistence and confidence and connects individual players to a community of teammates. [The study concluded]...Grateful people play together better.”<sup>5</sup>

And isn’t that so true with our team at Cascades. “Grateful people play together better.”

One of the many moments in the life of our church where we play well together is when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Yes, it is a moment where we reflect individually on the sacrifice that the Lord has made on our behalf. But it is also a chance for us to look around and see the gifts of love and friendship that

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<sup>4</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 116-117.

<sup>5</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 117.

surround us. What if the next time we shared communion, we engaged one another more with glad and sincere hearts? What if we gave high fives and hugs as we walked down the aisle? What if we truly made it a communal and festal act of celebration? How might that change our view of the sacrament? I think Jesus would be all for it!

And finally, we come to politics and how they can be moment of cultivating hearts of gratitude within us. Yes politics. I know that you all are wondering how I'm going to pull this one off!

My friends, we live in a day when our political leaders have fostered a virulent partisan politic that fails to acknowledge the image of God imprinted upon one another. Yes. God's image is imprinted even upon our political rival. What if our election seasons were marked more with kindness and goodwill? What if opponents came together to offer differing view points aimed to seek the common good? What if we resisted the urge to launch character assassination weapons against our opponents in order to boost our own ego and political rating?

Diana Bulter Bass writes, "The kinds of celebration that result from 'pie grabbing' breed resentment, the exact opposite of communal gratitude."<sup>6</sup> This only breeds a heart of ingratitude, like that of the Pharisee in our scripture story today who refused hospitality to Jesus and the sinful woman because he didn't see eye to eye with them.

"Ingratitude is a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. Ingratitude is about what we do not have, what we feel we deserve, what we can never get, or what keeps us from our rightful part of the pie. Ingratitude and genuine civic festivity are deadly enemies. If we cannot play together, if we are not thankful in the common arena, we cannot be a good team. Public ingratitude threatens rather than invites, isolates rather than unite. As a result, we lose the experience of shared communal joy."<sup>7</sup>

In America we have so much to be grateful for during our political season. We are free to vote according to our consciences. There is no power that forces or threatens us to vote one way or another. And then our elections result in a nonviolent transfer of powers. Do we realize what an incredible gift that is from God? That is something to celebrate.

"Communal gratitude might heal our civic heart, putting us on a path toward a new future of national emotional health and well-being."<sup>8</sup>

I like that notion! This election season let us forge a new future of American emotional health and common well-being!

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<sup>6</sup> 126.

<sup>7</sup> 127.

<sup>8</sup> Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 128

“Larry Dvoskin wrote, “As we travel with gratitude, and share that feeling - like a ripple it spreads across the world.”

So when a party invitation arrives, may we accept it with grateful hearts, knowing that the Kingdom of Heaven might just break into our midst. May we beware of the Pharisees in the crowd who refuse us hospitality for espousing a more liberal concept of God’s goodness and grace. And may our public displays of gratitude be as extravagant as that of a “sinful” woman unto Jesus that can have huge impacts on the world around us. So much so that people two thousand years from now might still be talking about it.

Indian mystical poet Rumi wrote, “Gratitude is the wine of the soul.” If that is so, may we be known as a people drunk off that kind of wine!