



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: November 1, 2009

Happy Birthday, Church!, Robert B. Culp
1 Corinthians 12; Hebrews 12 (Selections)

(Adapted from Ann Weems' Reaching for Rainbows)

Once upon a time there was a church that had only “party rooms.” There was a Board of Trustees’ Party Room, the Choir Party Room, the Feasting Party Room, the “Do Justice” Party Room, the “Love Mercy” Party Room, the “Be-Kind-To-Strangers” Party Room. In the very center of the building, there was a large round room with an altar and a cross, and it was called God’s Party Room.

As you may suspect, there seemed to be always an air of celebration and brightness at that church, and its festivity simply could not be denied. The people who did not attend that church and who lived outside that church pointed their fingers and shook their heads, muttering: “Something should be done about that church!” They were especially upset when they saw that the church’s members wore party hats and smiles, and they did so both inside and outside the church.

Now other congregations in the community came to take a look at what was going on there, and they were shocked when they saw this church having so much fun during a worship service – snapping their fingers, clapping their hands, moving around in their seats, and even laughing and dancing, and doing “such unusual things” in the community that other churches were not doing.

“That’s just plain sacrilegious,” these other congregations complained angrily. But the people in the “party church” just smiled at them and kept doing “such unusual things” like taking people in wheelchairs to the park and playing ball with them. When everybody else was collecting canned goods for the poor and needy, the members of this church bought a lot of pizzas and marched right into the dingy, dirty, paint-peeling apartments and sat down to eat with the tenants.

They held picnics for the old folks' home, and old men ran races, while members of the congregation stamped their feet in applause. It was at one of those picnics that some of the members climbed up on the church roof and shouted: "Good news!" At that point, one of the outsiders said, "Ah hah! Now we can get them for disturbing the peace!" The police arrived with sirens, ready to make a bunch of arrests, and about two hours later all the police came out of the church, and they were wearing party hats and smiles.

One Sunday afternoon, the entire congregation met at the jail and passed out flowers to the prisoners. The following week, after sharing bread and wine and a lot of hugs and laughter at the Lord's table, the people went to the hospital and asked to see those patients who were very ill and were dying. Then they gathered lovingly around the beds of those precious and hurting souls, and they held their hands and placed cool cloths across their foreheads, and they spoke to them of Life and Love, and the Light which the world's darkness has never put out.

The crowd that had followed them and gathered around were shocked and they said, "Disgraceful! They've got to be stopped!" And so the crowd's leaders sent a letter of appeal to the governing body of the church's denomination, and this committee of respected people came to the town to see for themselves.

"Do you deny the charges of doing unusual things and heresy?" asked the committee. "Do you deny that by your strange actions you've mocked the church and the Lord?" The people of the church looked into their stern red faces and smiled at them. They held out their hands to the committee and led them to the "Birthday Cake" Party Room. There on a table sat a large cake decorated beautifully with doves descending and red flames and bright, colorful words that read: "Happy Birthday, Church!" The people began cutting cake and blowing up balloons and handing out party hats to the committee members.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" cried the chairperson. "Can't you in this church family take anything seriously?"

"Oh yes," the people replied. "We take our commitment to the Lord very seriously, and we also take our love for all God's children and for every single one of God's saints very seriously."

"No, no, no! You don't take such matters seriously at all," interrupted the chairperson in a loud voice and a very red face. "You have all kinds of parties and you wear silly hats, and you blow up balloons and sing and dance and have altogether too much fun! Do you call that commitment?"

The people smiled at the chairperson, and they asked him if he would like a glass of wine.

At that point, the chairperson pounded his fist on the table. “I don’t want wine, and I don’t want any birthday cake! We’re here to reprimand you and to call you out, to show you that you are wrong, and to point out the errors of your ways. Can’t you be serious for a moment?” “We are being serious,” said the people. “We’re asking you to sit down with us and take communion with us.” “With birthday cake?” thundered the chairperson. “That’s outrageous!”

“Outrageous? We ask you to sit at our table and eat with us. God gave the Holy Spirit to believers, and blessed us with all kinds of gifts and talents, and that is something really to celebrate! That’s an occasion for a party. We and all the saints, including you, are celebrants of the gift of Life. We are a community, a family, and we are God’s church. Why are your faces all red when we are trying to do justice and to love mercy? Why do you shake your fists at us when we are trying to discover who is hurting in the world and do some healing in their lives ... and provide a safe and inviting place for all God’s children to grow in their faith and the feel real joy?”

It was then that the chairperson and the rest of his committee became very quiet, and they listened ... they really listened.

One of the church members continued, “We are happy that we can be the church, a community of people, who are many, yet are one ... who are different, but who walk together and welcome any who would walk with us. When we weep, there is someone to weep with us and to embrace us and to take us to a party. When we see injustices, we must be about God’s business of freeing those who are oppressed. When we are faithless or make all kinds of mistakes that hurt others, we have God’s promise of forgiveness. Isn’t it remarkable that we ourselves in our life together can be God’s good news? Is it any wonder that we have a church that’s full of party rooms? There is so much love to celebrate!”

The committee stared at the church people, and the church people moved closer to them and put their arms around them. The committee chairperson stepped up to the table and sliced a piece of birthday cake, took a bite, and then he laughed out loud. He began slicing the cake and passing it out. When the wine was poured and the hands were held, the chairperson raised his glass and said, “There is so much Love to celebrate! Happy Birthday, Church! Hooray for all the saints!”