

Clackamas United Church of Christ
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2.23.20

Jesus Came to Party

When Jeff came to me about a month ago with the idea of celebrating Mardi Gras here at church, I thought ... that's pretty weird.

And then I thought about it a little more and I realized that like all of Jeff's suggestions, it may have been weird, but it was also perfect.

To be honest, I don't know a lot about Mardi Gras. I've never been to Mardi Gras festivities and they don't teach you about the spirituality of Mardi Gras in seminary. I've seen pictures online, and as your spiritual advisor, I must tell you to not Google Mardi Gras images. It's bad for your soul. At least it was bad for my soul.

But I assure you that I was much more interested in learning about the history of Mardi Gras than looking up images, so I went to my favorite source for knowledge on the internet - wikipedia.

Did you know that Mardi Gras is French for Fat Tuesday? I don't think that's very PC and it's kinda mean to this coming Tuesday. Should we start a movement to call it "Husky Tuesday"? Or "Pleasantly Plump Tuesday"? Anyway, Fat Tuesday is actually a Christian tradition that says the Tuesday night before Ash Wednesday is the last night you can eat rich, fatty foods before Lent begins.

I read that on Wikipedia and noticed that Fat Tuesday is the *Last* night you can eat rich, fatty foods. Apparently, one tradition says we are supposed to eat rich and fatty foods every night from the 12th day of Christmas until the day before Ash Wednesday. That's a month and a half of deliciously rich food that I've been supposed to be eating on my Christian spiritual journey. Why didn't anyone tell me this in seminary? That's clearly a failure of the seminary system.

At this point in the sermon, many of you might have the sense that I am just stalling here at the beginning of this sermon because I have no idea how to connect Mardi Gras with Jesus and our reading of the transfiguration, which is the traditional reading on the Sunday before Lent begins. And you would be right! I am stalling. Because this is a difficult connection to make. Thank you Jeff.

I will make an attempt though. First, as I understand it, Christian spirituality is based on a simple idea. Jesus preached the Realm of Heaven is here on earth. In fact, Jesus was so united with the Realm of Heaven that wherever he went, he brought Heaven with him.

And do you know where one of Jesus' favorite places to go was? A party. Jesus loved a good party. And one of his favorite metaphors for heaven was a party. He told parables about a father whose son left and for many years he squandered his life and his father's money. Years later when his son came back home the father didn't respond with anger or judgment or resentment. Instead, he was just so happy that he threw his son a massive party.

Jesus not only used parties as a metaphor in his teachings, he also liked to go to parties. In fact, one of my favorite stories is about Jesus going to a wedding party. After their wedding, the bride and groom ran out of wine, and the people weren't leaving. The couple needed more wine, but the local 7/11 was apparently closed for the night. So after Jesus's mother Mary told him to perform a miracle, Jesus turned a bunch of jars of water into the best wine any of them had ever tasted. Now, there are some Christians who claim that Jesus came to earth to die. I think that's wrong. Jesus came to earth to show us how to party. To show us how to live in an inclusive community where God's love flows as abundantly and freely to everyone as the wine flowed at that wedding party.

And then there was that time Jesus went to Levi's house. Levi got rich and famous by selling pants - actually I don't think that's true. He was a tax collector. But Levi hosted a party for Jesus where there were "sinners and tax collectors" and Pharisees and scribes. Jesus was minding his own business and having a good time at the party with the sinners and tax collectors, when some Pharisees and scribes began complaining to Jesus' disciples that he was hanging out with the wrong type of people.

Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Now, most interpretations of this passage will tell you that the meaning is obvious. Jesus called the people he was partying with to repent. They were the ones who were sick and in need of a physician. They were the sinners who needed to repent.

But what if that interpretation is wrong? What if the "sinners" who needed to repent were not the people Jesus was eating with. What if the people most caught up in sin were the Pharisees and scribes? After all, throughout the Gospels, they are the people Jesus most explicitly says need to repent of their sins.

The Pharisees and scribes in the Gospels are the religious conservative elites. They were always trying to protect themselves and their sense of purity from others they deemed impure. And so they went around accusing sinners and tax collectors of being sinners.

But little did they know that in their accusations and judgments, they were the biggest sinners of them all. They were the sickest of them all. They were the ones in need of a physician. But they were so spiritually sick that they didn't even realize they were spiritually sick. Instead, they projected their own sickness onto others. And so they had

no clue that when Jesus said he came to call sinners to repentance that he was talking about them.

Here's the point - whenever we use religion, or anything, but especially religion, to divide the world up into us and them, we have missed the point. Whenever we use religion to make judgments against other people, we are the ones who are spiritually sick and in need of a physician who will heal us.

Jesus didn't come to divide the world into us against them. He didn't come to show us how to be judgmental against others. He came to show us how to live in community with one another. He came to show us how to party with one another in a way where we leave our judgments against others at the door and love people for who they are.

So, what does this have to do with the story of the transfiguration? Jesus took three of his disciples with him up a mountain. While at the top of the mountain, the disciple, Peter, James, and John, have a mystical experience. They saw Moses and the great prophet Elijah. And then they saw Jesus gleaming in white. Jesus was transfigured as he glowed with the presence of God.

Now, I am not a mystic. But I do know that many of you are. And what I know from studying the mystics is that they have come to see the world differently. From my normal perspective, all I see is just the material world. Your body is just a body. A meal is just a meal. A party is just a party. A tree and a bush are just a tree and a bush. This is a material worldview and it's what I normally have.

But mystics always see something more. They see the spiritual within the physical. For example, there's a story of Moses. He was a shepherd and he frequently took his flock by a certain bush. One day he walked by the bush and noticed that it was burning with the presence of God. He walked up to the bush and he heard the voice of God calling to him.

There's an ancient tradition from the rabbis that says Moses walked by that bush hundreds of times, and each time that bush was burning with the presence of God. But it was only this time that Moses stopped and opened his eyes to see that the bush was burning.

But the rabbis said that what was true about that particular bush is true about every bush. In fact, every bush, every tree, every mountain, all of creation is burning with the presence of God, if you just have eyes to see.

And the disciples were up on the Mountain and their eyes were open to seeing that, like the bush in the story of Moses, Jesus was gleaming with the presence of God. But here's the thing: Jesus was always gleaming with the presence of God. When Jesus was at that wedding party, he was gleaming. When Jesus was baptized and God's voice said to him, you are my son, with whom I am well pleased, he was gleaming.

When Jesus was preaching and teaching, he was gleaming with the presence of God, if only people had the eyes to see.

And what is true about Jesus is true about you and me. You are gleaming with the presence of God. Whether you are gay or straight, cisgender or transgender, black, brown, or white, tall or short, sinner or righteous, Republican or Democrat, homeless or homed ... none of that changes the fact that you are gleaming with the presence of God.

And so the mystical aspect of Jesus and Mardi Gras, of Moses and the bush, of you and of all creation, is that there is no such thing as just a party. There's no such thing as just a meal. There's no such thing as just a bush. There's no such thing as just a person. For all of creation is burning alive with the presence of God.

May we have the eyes to see. Amen.