

Is it Getting Heavy? Not with the Lord!
based on Luke 14: 15-24, David Jahnke, 2/19/17

So preaching can be a pretty serious business. And I have not strayed too far from the seriousness of my calling the last few months. So much so that I was a bit convicted by a song by the wonderful 90s rock band The Flaming Lips. The song is Waiting for Superman which has messianic connotations. And the chorus goes:

Is it gettin' heavy?

Well, I thought it was already as heavy

As can be [from Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots]

I was convicted because it's already heavy in our nation. And then you come to church and your preacher adds to the weight. But not today; at least not much, I hope.

Today we remember that our burden has been lifted and our chains taken off. We are under God's reign, not sin's. We are under grace, not any Law that demands perfect obedience or else; we are under the promise of everlasting life! Not the victory of death. So no matter what comes our way, we can let go and let God... to quote a cliché that used to irritate the heck out of me. But I not get irritated anymore. Because just I am under God's reign of love and grace and thus free, so is everyone out there and I want to help them know that. And irritation and judgment are not very good expressions of God's reign.

So please take me with a grain of salt when I am getting heavy on a Sunday morning and you are feeling like this world is already as heavy as it can be! After all, this place and this time are meant to be the great dinner banquet which Jesus alludes to in his parable. And the Spirit of the great banquet was of course one of joyful celebration. What else could it be when the invitation comes from the all-powerful, all-loving master of the universe? And when the setting is the Kingdom of heaven embodied here?

So I never want church to feel like a burden to anyone. Most of us have more than enough stress and do not need more at church. Most of us have enough guilt and do not need any added on by the judgment of others, unless we clearly need direction. Most of us have enough work and do not need any added on, unless we enjoy it, at least some of the time. Now I am not giving you permission to resign from church work just because it is not a day at the beach. But if you consistently feel burdened by church work then you are probably not called to it.

Because church and worship in particular is meant to relieve guilt, and stress; it is a time to get away from work and be restored. I hope that is what you feel here. Because everything about Christ's life, death and resurrection is about our burden being lifted by God.

When I was young, I was profoundly burdened by the seeming meaninglessness and true brokenness in life. Like almost everyone, I tried to overcome this modern angst by resorting to basic pleasures but doing that only leaves a growing burden in its wake.

I only started to overcome this as I came to understand that life was about love and love was giving one's self to others. I started to sense a kind of purpose and meaning in life. But then I had a new weight to contend with-- not living up to life's purpose. I did not do much of anything for others beyond being nice and not hurting them, and it seemed nobody else really cared very much about the plight of the world either.

It was only after I came to believe in God that the burden of life was lifted. The literal Hell around me started to lift-- week after week, month after month, year after year. And it has been replaced by a beautiful lightness of life that can only come knowing God. I hope you all feel that and I want it for those of you who do not.

But you have to accept an invitation from God to joy, love and peace. And we do that through believing deeply in them. So if you already believe in these things, remember them time and again and open yourself up to them through an active relationship with God who is the personal unity of them all. If you do not believe in them, you cannot experience them other than as a momentary and fleeting deception to your "realistic" and ultimately nihilistic worldview.

Now many of you may struggle with the notion of knowing God. You may not have had a clear revelation that God exists or what kind of God He is.

I have been reading a brilliant Process Theologian named David Tracy. Tracy talks about the public nature of theology. And how theology must be in conversation with and connected to the search for universal human values and meaning in the humanities and social sciences. And to oversimplify his complex theology, I think we can say that your intuitive sense of the good, the right, the true and the meaningful is rooted in and aimed at nothing less than God. Again, either these invisible things are realities (which to me sounds an awful lot like God) or they are fleeting dreams and deceptions.

Now we also have to be careful about going down the path of making God in our image. Tracy recognizes this and seeks to honor the God of scripture who is not so simple, and who, in fact, can look as complex and confusing as we humans do. But again, the personhood and humanity of God is one of the great blessings of scripture. Because we can relate to God and vice-versa!!

Tracy talks about God being dipolar. That's di- with a d. Though with passages like today's, you kind of wonder about God being a bit bipolar. I mean in one verse, God is wanting to compel anyone and everyone to join the banquet and in the next, none of those who were originally invited are getting in!

Di-polarity can help explain this. It means God possesses the good in seemingly opposing poles like mercy and judgment, immutability and mutability, absoluteness and relativity which just means relating to all things. [from Tracy's Blessed Rage for Order]

This helps explain the God of the Bible who is both perfectly patient in waiting on his children everywhere to return to Him. And at the same time, He feels devastated that they do not join the party now! Our God is both utterly graceful and provides us with complete freedom to find our way into His future. And at the same time, He desperately wants us now, shows us the Way to Him in Jesus and grieves our unwillingness to go to Him.

Ours is a God who is beyond everything and will not fail to bring creation which is in the palm of his hands into it's final and rightful place. And yet God is also as tiny and powerless as a human embryo in the womb of his mother Mary; a God who is affected by and affecting everything we are. And this means that God is at work on a microscopic level in addition to being grander than and unaffected by a billion billion galaxies.

So when chaos, sin and death are near, we know that God is above it all, unaffected and will save us from all of these big things which we cannot defeat on our own. And yet that salvation is at work here and now in every little detail of our lives.

This has tremendous implications for us. We too need to stand above the fray, unaffected by powers, principalities and people who want to drag us down and sap our joy and trap us in their own broken-ness. We care about the broken-ness. But it is our steadfastness that will bring healing. Our not giving into the guilt trip of having to do a. b. and c. along with x.y. and z. And not giving into the apathy of feeling like you do not have to do anything! Our refusing to return the anger of those around us with our own anger. Our refusing to let the misery of others make us miserable. Our not giving into their excuse-making and blaming.

Jesus warned about making excuses to not join the joyful celebration of God. And the people had good ones! Two of them had very important work to do. Another had to think about his new wife and their life together. But God was not pleased with these excuses. And on this side of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Spirit, we have no excuse whatsoever. Because we know that all will be well. And we have the Spirit filling our lives with the things of the Kingdom of heaven.

What exactly is lacking in our lives that would keep us from joy? If any of you are lacking daily bread, clean water, shelter, friends or family, please let me know. This church does a good job in all these regards.

It was the knowledge of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit which allowed Paul and all of the other apostles to rejoice in all things despite all of the hardships they encountered. So be filled with the love, joy and peace which are always knocking on the door of your hearts and minds. And rejoice in the universal fellowship, discipleship and good work of Jesus Christ to whom belongs...