

Jeanne Marcus: Party On!

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Good Morning,

Many years ago, I came across this story written about why God created the world. With apologies for its patriarchal language, here it is:

One afternoon, before anything was made, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit sat around in the unity of their Godhead, discussing one of the Father's fixations. From all eternity, it seems, he had had this idea about being. He would keep thinking up all kinds of unnecessary things—new ways of being and new kinds of being to be. And as they talked, God the Son suddenly said, "Really, this is absolutely great stuff. Why don't I go out and mix us up a batch?" And God the Holy Spirit said, "Terrific! I'll help you."

So they all pitched in, and after supper that night, the Son and the Holy Spirit put on this tremendous show of being for the Father. It was full of water and light and frogs; pinecones kept dropping all over the place and crazy fish swam around in the wineglasses. There were mushrooms and grapes, horseradishes and tigers—and men and women and kids everywhere to taste them, to juggle them, to join them and to love them. And God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, "Wonderful! Just what I had in mind! Good! Good! Good!" And all God the Son and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was the same thing. So they shouted together, "Good! Good! Good!" and they laughed for ages and ages, saying things like how great it was for beings to be, how clever of the Father to think of the idea, how kind of the

Son to go to all that trouble putting it together, and how considerate of the Spirit to spend so much time directing and choreographing. And they told old jokes, drank their wine, and they all threw ripe olives and pickled mushrooms at each other, forever and ever, Amen.

So there it is – a little brash in its exposition, perhaps, but you get the idea – an Absolutely Fabulous Big Creation Gala, where everything and everyone – from sandpipers to sand sharks to loan sharks, is an object of divine delight; where every single duck, every single pimento and every single one of us is just exactly what God had in mind. And the party keeps on, rain or shine, with God always toying around, full of wacky new ideas, morphing this into that, and rearranging the pieces, from the billions of stars to the millions of us to the quadrillions of tiny organisms both here on earth and who knows where else. And each and every one just exactly what God had in mind.

We get glimpses of the party throughout the Hebrew Testament—for instance, in Isaiah's vision of the new heavens and new earth, a Jerusalem of rejoicing, with fruiting vineyards, and healthy dancing children, and of course, the wolf and the lamb snoozing together. And there are the songs to the beloved in the Song of Solomon. But no place is the vision more vibrant than in the psalms of rejoicing. In them, we see the sun bounding out of his very own custom-made pavilion; there are rivers clapping their hands, trees shouting for joy, and the seas thundering in rejoicing; mountains melting like wax just because they so enjoy being in God's presence. And there are the people of God, dancing and singing, playing lutes and lyres, heads anointed and with wine cups always filled to overflowing.

It seems clear to me that it was the sights and sounds of the cosmic celebration that filled Jesus' days and nights in the desert, recounted in the gospel reading last week. So maybe the devil is by his side, putting the devil's own spin on

things; but Jesus feasted his eyes and filled his ears on a vision so intriguing, so captivating, so irresistible, that Jesus never got over it, he was forever in its spell.

We know this because of what comes next. What comes next is that Jesus spends the rest of his life telling everyone he sees, everyone who will listen, about this incredible realm, this fabulous dimension that he calls the Kingdom of God. He tries all sorts of ways to get people to see a glimpse of it. It's like a pearl so fantastic, you'd be willing to sell off everything just to get at it. It's so incredible, it's like a full day's pay for workers who've hardly put in a lick of work. It's like that feeling of finding something you had but then you lost it, and you really wanted it back, and you looked all over, and then finally there it was.

Or it was like blowing your father's money on a few weeks of life in the fast lane, and now here you are, hung over, strung out, broke, hating yourself, ashamed to go home. But then, when you finally get it together to come back, you find you're still absolutely the apple of your father's eye.

But maybe most of all, Jesus envisioned the kingdom of god as a huge dinner party, a state banquet, held in the royal dining hall, and it's for absolutely everyone, and especially for all of those who never would have expected an invitation. Invitations were hand-delivered to the fields and the back-alleys; drivers were dispatched to pick up guests at the shacks and even the ditches. And as they arrive, their names are formally announced as they are ushered into the banquet hall, to a feast beyond belief.

And Jesus lived his life in accordance with that vision, as well. The first public appearance of his ministry, according to John, was a wedding feast, and Jesus made sure there was plenty of wine to go around. His proclivity for partying got him the reputation of being a glutton and a drunk. And these celebrations were open to all sorts of people—to tax

collectors and scoundrels; to lepers and cripples; and he virtually surrounds himself with women and children, folks who didn't really count as members of society. And always, he greets these persons in their true identity, as particularly delightful individuals, as the honored guests at the royal palace.

Today is the second Sunday in Lent, a season not traditionally linked with party going. The gospel reading for today comes from the point in Jesus' ministry when it's becoming increasingly clear to him that the great news about the inclusive royal banquet isn't being warmly received across the board. While the dispossessed are pretty excited about it, the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees are not amused. They have no intention of showing up, and what's more, they hope to assure that nobody else goes, either. At this point, then, Jesus sees that, at least at one level, things are not likely to end up well. The tone of the gospel accounts are darkening, the apostles are getting a bit querulous.

So in the spirit of the Lenten scriptures, here is a fitting question: *If I believe that the truth about myself and this world is that at the deepest level we're at the royal banquet and that I, and also you, are the guests of honor, then how to account for the fact that often you don't see that reflected in me, in how I speak and how I act?*

You might remember those "Magic Eye" pictures that were a craze a year or so ago. There'd be several rows of what looked like blots and squiggles, or there'd be something like a cut-and-paste collage gone awry. The point of the things are, if you can get your eyes to get the picture out-of-focus in a certain way, then another, a 3-D picture comes into focus— an American flag, say, or a sun setting behind palm trees.

I've never been good at seeing these extra-dimensional pictures: sometimes I can see them for a few moments, and then they go out of focus again. And just because I've seen the

hidden image one time doesn't mean I'll be able to get it to reappear again the next time I try.

Not to try to hang too much weight on such a slender thread, but for me the kingdom of God in Lent is like a Magic Eye picture. It's right there, right here; and yet mostly I can't get the perspective right, I can't see it. Maybe for a second, I can see it—but then my eyes readjust to their "normal" setting, and it's lost. The best I can do is remember that I have seen it.

The scribes and the Pharisees didn't see it: they never did get the focus right. What they saw were Roman troops, corrupt tax collectors, roving bands of Zealot guerillas; they saw lepers, sinners and crowd control problems in Jerusalem during the high holidays. They saw this peasant talking on about the kingdom of God, and it looked like trouble to them. But they never did see the kingdom.

It's a lot like that for me as well. Too often, I look at myself, at the world around me, and I just see the squiggles. I see myself, my hair is graying, my body sags a bit, like an ice-cream cone starting to melt. I'm not nearly as smart as I used to think. I'm too judgmental. I've always been likely to see the glass half empty, and sometimes I'm given to a much darker view. And when I see the world without depth, it's like reading the Washington Post, column after column of problems, from the collapse of the district schools, to the collapse of the Russian economy. It's life reflected in statistics and regulatory language; it's too many meetings, deadlines, budgets, traffic tie-ups and everyday indignities.

Maybe I'm accentuating the negative a bit here, but that doesn't matter. The point is: when I can get my sight right, when the image behind the images comes into focus, I know that I am there, at the royal banquet. On much rarer occasions, I know I'm the guest of honor, and everyone at the party has been waiting all this time for me to show up. And I see that

absolutely the same is true of each of us, –each and every one of you an honored guest. As well as everyone in line at the Giant, the crowds downtown, the people we work with, it's even true of my troublesome neighbor across the street. The trees really are shouting for joy, and Sligo Creek, if not thundering, is at least gurgling in rejoicing. There's plenty of wine for all.

Then why is it so hard for me to live my life at the party? Now here I thought to insert one of those David Letterman Top-10 lists–top ten reasons I don't live in sight of the Kingdom. But, in the interest of time and not exhausting my welcome, I'll keep it to three.

So, reason number 3: I already know what I intend to be doing tomorrow. This is that old issue of control. I've been raised to keep my eye on the prize, to set goals, be dependable, to arrive on time. I have a schedule, I might even know where I want to be three years from now. But the kingdom party seems to suggest a looser stance – maybe it's more like one of fabled weeklong hippie bashes in the California hills. By the end, the formerly repressed heroine has decided to leave her boring business-major fiancé to find her real self with a new friend who's traveling the next day to Morocco. That is, to really be at this kingdom party, we've got to be willing to take the risk of being seduced by any of these delightful creatures there with us.

I once worked with a man who did seem to live much of his life in the kingdom, to an unusual degree. I loved being with him, because I'd always feel welcome, he had a lot of enthusiasm, and he'd always laugh at my jokes. One Day, I called him on the phone, needing to explain something and get his decision. As always, I had his full attention and enthusiasm; but then, the other line rang on his phone, and he put me on hold to answer it. Long minutes passed. I finally realized that now he was giving that full attention, enthusiasm, welcome to whomever had him on line two. Now he was so wholeheartedly on

line two, he'd likely forgotten that there even was a line one, much less that someone was on it. He saw the party, saw it as naturally as I saw the surface. And whomever he was talking to was the guest of honor, the most perfect expression of God's creative genius.

He was truly a lousy administrator, and his wife never knew when, or whether, he would finally make it home for dinner. He was tremendously loving, but a little simple-minded, like a child—but you know what they say about children and the kingdom. This works out fine, as long as you aren't the one on line two.

Which brings me to the number two reason: it breaks my heart. I flee the party in tears, spend months or maybe years feeling angry and hurt. Then, finally, I feel so awful and dead not being at the party that I have to come straggling back.

I remember such a time. My group of closest friends in my church home in Texas was being inundated with waves of divorces, remarriages, career changes, life changes, elations, depressions and even mental breakdown. It was an awfully painful time, full of pain and confusion—some important friendships didn't survive all the changes. Part of the confusion for me was that many of these changes seemed so much the result of the inbreaking of the kingdom into these lives.

In the midst of all that, I planned a visit to my aunt who had been an emotional mother to me. In her mid-fifties, she had evaluated her life, sought help for alcohol dependence, and had decided to pursue her long-time dream of going to college. She had applied and been accepted at the commuter campus of her state's university. But before I could travel to celebrate with her, before the next term started, she found that she had an aggressive and inoperable lung cancer. I was floored by the unfairness of it.

That's how it is in the kingdom. The party can get a little

rough. God's creatures are free, meaning they're free to make all sorts of moves that step on my toes. And life includes death—God seems to have a thing about change, about the new coming into being and the old passing away. I suppose you've got to expect blood when the host of the party has invited both lambs and lions. But it can get to feel like a bit too much. I know some people walk out on principle; others storm out in anger. I picture myself more slinking away, and curling into the fetal position outside the gate. While the host is calling, "Wait a minute, don't go, I love you."

And the number one reason why I can't always live in the kingdom: Just because. When all is said and done, after I finish blaming my parents and my Catholic school for my early conditioning, after I've worked on all my issues in therapy, after prayer and meditation, there still is something about my inability to keep the kingdom in focus that still plumb eludes me. If sin is missing the mark, then you can imagine me not even seeing there's a target over there. It feels like there's a sort of spiritual death wish, why else would I have made some of the decisions I have, said some of the things I have? Maybe this is as close as I come to a sense of what people mean by original sin. Try as I might, I know I just never will really get it all the way right. I'll always blink, lose the focus. This is where hope comes in: the gut knowledge that no matter how obnoxious I seem, I won't ever get permanently kicked out of the party; and if I leave on my own, I'm always welcome back. And with hope, also forgiveness, the sense that in the morning, the old day does really pass, and each new day always brings a new invitation.

I know that I am not saying anything new. I know the divine gala isn't news to Seekers because of all the ways that I've experienced the royal party here. One of the first times I ever showed up at Seekers, years ago now, everyone was filing into the worship space for the period of silence before the service. But the music that week had a beat, and in one of

those spontaneous inbreakings of the Spirit that Kate Cudlipp talked about [two weeks](#) ago, it seemed that within seconds, the whole place was on its feet, clapping and swaying and dancing. It took me a few seconds to figure it out – we never danced in church; but then, that focus got right, and there it was, the party. Both the kingdom and its elusiveness fills Seekers' liturgies, season after season.

And I've even gotten glimpses of myself as special guest – my time in mission group has been important here. But preparing this sermon, I realized how much the willingness of Seekers to open its pulpit to all those who feel they have a word to say is an especially important and meaningful expression of recognizing the honored guest in each other. Maybe preparing sermons is difficult for everyone; but I think the deepest part of my difficulty preparing had to do with accepting the possibility of myself as honored guest.

I suppose that, at this time in Seekers life, it's almost inevitable that I'd say a little something about our search for new space. Liz Vail suggested a few weeks ago that it'd be appropriate for such a world-travelling group to meet in an airport. Someone else identified a space for rent over a blues club. One rather irreverent non-Seeker suggested that for all that, we could use a bowling alley, they're never open for business on Sunday mornings. Wherever we end up, I hope that the reason we're there is that it helps us see ourselves at that banquet of outrageous proportions; and that it helps us to want to shout out invitations to everyone around, at the top of our voices.

Party on!