

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"Inreach and Outreach"  
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Have you ever thought much about what God thinks about partying? I never had a chance to take a course at Seminary or Graduate School or university on the subject of A Theology of Partying because such a course was never offered, to my knowledge. But I do own a book called *The Kingdom of God is a Party* written by Tony Campolo, a person who has been called an Evangelical left wing Christian, a Professor of Sociology at Eastern University in Pennsylvania and a Baptist pastor and evangelist. I think I recall him saying once that on the airplane when he wanted to talk to a person sitting next to him on the airline he would say he was a Professor of Sociology. But when he wanted to have some time to himself, he said he was a Baptist Evangelist.

We don't usually associate God with partying and celebrating, at least most of us don't because we have a picture of a God that doesn't have a very good time or existence. Some think He's out to get us, others see Him as a celestial police officer. It's good to ask yourself how you picture God. Because the God the Gospel presents to us is one who rejoices in one person coming to his or her senses, one lamb in the ditch who is rescued, one coin found in that long lost secret hiding place.

This God throws a party when one rebellious person changes his or her mind about following Jesus. This God gets all the angels together and enjoys the wonderful music and celebrates with all His might.

I suppose the reason we don't associate God and partying or celebrating is because the party in our culture has become synonymous with debauchery or dissipation. In other words, partying has been equated with drunkenness and inappropriate behavior, part of what Jeremiah calls those "skilled in doing evil" or what the Psalmist and the writers of Proverbs simply call "foolishness." But you know if the Scripture has Jesus teaching that the angels all party when one sinner comes to their senses, then you know it is a good thing. This is something that we should learn about celebrating.

Because Presbyterians do celebrate. Don't let anyone tell you differently. We don't have to always be dour and stoic. We too can fully enter into life changing, wonderful celebration involving us in the fullness of our senses.

I hope tonight's induction celebration will be one of those times. It is meant to celebrate the call of God to one individual and his family, but it is also and more importantly a time for renewing a community, for saying "This is a new beginning." What you are embarking on together has never been done before. It is scary and attractive all at once. And every one of you is involved because every one of you is connected to this community in some special and unique way. That's why it's important for you to be there and you can invite your friends as well.

Presbyterians do celebrate at our life transitional ministries, at our baptisms, at our confirmation and membership receptions, at our weddings, and even at our funerals. We celebrate because we serve a God who has overcome death and who holds the keys to life. We celebrate the One who teaches us to celebrate.

We should celebrate when we know a person has changed their mind about God and chosen to go a different way than rebellion against God. When someone chooses to commit their life to following Christ and being a part of Jesus' words and actions in this city and beyond, that's worth a party. And you can hold me accountable to what I am saying for the future.

We need to celebrate more often what God is doing in people's lives while they are still alive. Sometimes we do this better once they are gone. But why not involve individuals in eulogies before they die and celebrate them in the community so they too can praise God together with us?

All of the above is to encourage the practice of godly partying but also to say that among countless ministries there are two main ministries in the church. The first ministry is what I have called inreach. Paul calls it "receiving mercy," experiencing grace, and knowing full acceptance: an example of a person who comes to faith, comes to trusting God just as he is. Paul needed to become aware of the reality of his blasphemy, his rebellion against God even though he was religious, his persecution of Christians, his violence and what he called being a "chief among sinners," a serious sinner.

And some Christian movements over the years have laid emphasis on this aspect of the faith, what I call “inreach.” It is the conviction that every one of us is a sinner, a rebel toward God, deeply in need of a heart transformation to become someone deeply in love with God, choosing God’s ways and agreeing with God’s perspective on life. All of us need to look within, and with Paul, need to see how desperately we are lost without God, how our lives are not manageable without God, how we need to change, choose to change, and allow ourselves to be changed by God. That “inreach” then becomes the motivation and the overflow of what God gives us. It is inreach that brings the empowerment with which we can do “outreach.”

Then we can serve the poor, the needy, the desperate from the strength and grace given us in Christ. Then we can provide clean water and hospitals and education and medicine to those in desperate need across the planet. The outreach is based on the inreach. The reason and the strength to do what we do is based on what we have become and what we are in Jesus Christ.

Then we can offer this relationship to God to those who are confused, to those who need to reconnect with God, to those who are truly lost. There are streams of Christianity who seem to only do the former and neglect the latter. There are streams of Christianity who seem to only do the latter and neglect the former. But the depth of our spirituality is intimately connected to our actions, our attitudes, our presentation of the Gospel. Isn’t it better to be a church that cares both about an individual’s relationship to Christ, as well as her or his outreach to the community? Evangelism, the presentation of the gospel to one’s neighbor or friend, is not mutually exclusive to social action, which seeks to make another human being’s life better in some way.

Somewhere, somehow the body of Christ has forgotten that both inreach and outreach is needed. And you can probably name the denominations that do one or the other better. You may even associate or categorize your Christianity in terms of what you do better. But Jesus calls us to both. He challenges those who do not care about the poor and the needy to rethink their position and even to vote accordingly.\* He challenges those who do not care about their spiritual health or the spiritual health of their neighbors to rethink their position and to talk and act accordingly.

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\* Please see the Poverty Fact Sheet also available at [www.stdavids.nf.ca](http://www.stdavids.nf.ca)

There are ministries with cups of cold water and ministries with words that urge relationship with God. There are times to look within and ask ourselves where we are with God and times to look outside ourselves to others' needs. The danger otherwise is to become more like those who were sneering at Jesus' teaching, the Pharisees and the scribes. Unlike his pharisaic background, Paul puts forward a humility that is simply the self-knowledge of one's sins and rebellion against God, and then emphasizes the amazing touch of God's grace and mercy that transforms us.

My hope is that this congregation can be a place where we can experience the full range of Christian ministries, hundreds and thousands of ministries. Here we can pray for one another, confess our sins, be thankful to God, ask God for healing, trust God for those who are departed, celebrate with God in those who are new, in physical life, in spiritual life, with joy at the communion table, with celebration at the baptismal font, with serious reflection as we pray through the news, pray through our voting, pray through our social action, pray through our evangelism, pray through our reading of the Bible and every other literature we encounter, inviting God into every part of life, and believing God is big enough to transform not only individual hearts, but the community and the culture as well.

To grossly summarize human history, we can say that individual and corporate expressions of Christianity have been all over the map. Some Christians turn off people to the faith with their faith. Some churches turn off people to the One they believe in by their double standards and sins. Although this is true, it does not negate our message, our identity, our mission nor the reality of our relationship to Christ, to one another, to our culture and to the world.

We will make mistakes. Let me personalize that. I will make mistakes. I will sin. I will hurt some of you sometime. It's not that I will try to make mistakes or plan for hurting others or sinning. I'm still being redeemed from my sin. It's a part of my ongoing sanctification, my becoming more like Christ as I seek to follow Him. I realize too that some of you will hurt me, and sin in ways that will detract from our identity in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, God will use us. God will not give up on us. God will transform us. And as He does, let us give thanks. Here in this new season of Thanksgiving between the blueberry harvest and the second Monday in October, we have a chance to thank God as never before and celebrate as

*never before. Let me just end with a quick blueberry story...another spiritual story from the blueberry patch: At first, when you find the berries, it is wonderful and whether they are large or small, in clumps or individual there is a sense of deep thanksgiving. But later on, it is possible to look further and further and not be satisfied unless they are large and plentiful and easy to pick...How easily our thanksgiving turns to our demands, and therefore less and less thanksgiving...*

So let us choose to thank God and celebrate the good He is doing right here, and look forward to what God will be doing through you and through me.

Let us pray.