

Last night I started watching a Netflix movie called, “Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened.” This movie contained just about everything I don’t believe in. The things that really get under my skin, social media, FOMO, living a glory perfect life, extravagance, loud concert festivals, fraud, dishonesty, and take advantage of people’s weaknesses. It was a train wreck and I couldn’t stop watching it. I was up until 1am and felt this horrible pit in my stomach as I went to bed. People stepping on each other and taking advantage of the weaker sits so raw with me. So, I tossed and turned and finally fell asleep about 2am.

At 5am I had three dogs staring at me and panting in my face. “Are you kidding me?” I thought. I begrudgingly got up and let them all out. When I went to let them back in only two were there. One was missing. I put on my boots and coat and walked around the yard until I found her. This was not an awesome midnight stroll. I was so irritated. I finally got them all in to see their water was completely empty. Deep breath. I filled it and fed all three of them. I went back to bed and tried to fall asleep. Now the rest of the house was awake. The TV came on and it was really loud. Do I get up again and go ask to have it turned down? No. I’ll just shut the door. Now I’m back in bed ready to drift back off to sleep. Scratch, scratch. The dogs want back in the room. “Are you kidding me?!” This went on for the next hour. No sleep. I fought it and finally fell sleep for a few moments. Then, heavy breathing. The dogs were back... ready for their walk. ARGH!!

Again, I begrudgingly got up and put my coat and boots to take them for a walk. It was freezing. It was icy. It was hard to pick up the dog poop. My hands were cold. The snow seemed all brown. A car was in my way when I tried to cross the road. The dogs weren’t listening. My list of what was wrong with today was growing... and growing... and growing. I felt myself become more agitated, irritated, and annoyed. The more I thought about all the negatives, the worse I felt. I tried to pray. It was hard to see God as a glorious God. Everything felt so blahh. What was there to celebrate God for? Then I tried gratitude. I started the gratitude list of all the things I wish I had... “I’m grateful for sleep, for sunshine, for warm weather.” This wasn’t helping. I stopped. Honestly, I just wanted to cry.

How does my awful morning tie in at all to the readings for today and the Third Sunday after the Epiphany? I have you curious now, huh? Let’s start with the first reading from Nehemiah.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

In this passage in Nehemiah we meet the people as they are coming together to hear the word of God read aloud. The text tells us that the people have called this meeting, and as we meet them

in the story, we know from previous chapters that this is a fractured community, where neighbors have been at odds with one another and where injustice has become commonplace. As they heard the scrolls, they were reminded that the promise land was no longer theirs, they saw their own faithlessness to God, and they were filled with regret. They began to remember and recall all the tough and challenging things- and they wanted to just cry.

So, this seems kind of odd. This is a fractured community in hard times, with many challenges and problems. Yet, rather than focus on the problems, the people are told to throw a party and celebrate. What? That seems like the totally wrong thing to do. We don't feel like it.

Don't we do similar things in our community? Don't we mourn an individual's situation or discuss our frustrations with systems that don't work, lack of resources, high rates of substance use, and mental illness. We talk about lack of housing and difficulty finding jobs. We are really good at making a depressing list of issues. We are brilliant at pointing out what is broken, wrong, and not working. When we stare at the huge list it just looks so huge... so broken and we become hopeless about it. Well, let's just take some clothes to the thrifty store and call it good.

I fell into this trap just this morning. Thank goodness I had a reminder, right here in our readings for today. Isn't this at the heart of sin- the pull to get lost in the wrongness of things. The desire to lament in how awful it is or how bad we have it. It feeds itself and festers. I remember a kid's story Pastor Sid once shared. There was an old man who was telling his grandson about a great battle. This battle was going on inside of him. You see, there were two wolves. One wolf was mean. He didn't share, he said mean things, and he was always picking fights. The other wolf was generous and kind. He apologized when he needed to, he shared, he was very loving. Who won the battle? The little kid asked, "which wolf wins?" He responded, "the one I feed."

God is showing us another way to be in community. This way of being asks us to love our neighbors by celebrating the gifts and talents they bring to the community. Rather than starting with a list of problems, we start by looking at our assets. We look for those who love to read, those who love children, those who bake, those who sing. In this spirit of appreciation, the assets that are already present are able to grow and bloom. When we learn to celebrate the gifts God has given, "the joy of the Lord" can be our strength to create change.

Where can we see joy and celebration in the midst of grief and worry? Are we focusing on the broken parts of our body and what doesn't work? Our aches, ailments, and loss of vitality? Or are we focusing on our gifts and our assets? We can do this within, which wolf are we feeding, and in our communities as well.

We are one community- one body with many parts, many gifts. Paul talks about these spiritual gifts. Earlier in the letter, Paul gave two principles of discernment regarding them: 1. That which comes from the Spirit will manifest in committed faith in Jesus Christ and 2. Spiritual gifts are to be used for the common good, rather than elevate the status of a particular individual (1 Cor. 12:7). Paul weaves these together; the community is the body of Christ, caring for the common good is what faith in Jesus looks like.

Last night watching the movie I was immersed in FOMO, one upping, stepping on each other, a list of problems, and using gifts for the betterment of the individual. In watching this frenzy of the sin wolf, I began to feed this wolf inside of me. It came out in being annoyed with the dogs and seeing the world as a list of problems. How often do I feed this wolf and shrink my gifts and get lost in the daunting task of making anything any different?

But I came back to myself. In preparing to be with you, this community, I came back to celebrating the gifts I can bring. I came back to the gifts each one of you adds to our one community. Our community as the body of Christ. In celebrating, in returning to joy, I see the next steps forward. I see the way forward. Where have you been creating a list of what's not working? With your partner? With your kids? In your job? In this church? How can you stop and celebrate? What party can you throw?

Chris Tomlin: Holy is the Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVWBt8bfmCs>