

The China Lake Conference Center is located about twenty miles east of Maine's capital city of Augusta. I note this because the town the Center is located in, China, Maine, rolls up its sidewalks about 4 p.m. in the afternoon. Thus, Augusta is the closest city with any "night life." Those of us who would spend several days at the Conference Center would take one night and head to the Pizza Hut in Augusta. It was not that the food was not good, in fact it was great. It was just that we needed a change of scenery. I recall one winter night when six of us were enjoying the break from the work of the week and the pizza, exchanging stories and having fun. We looked and our waitress was standing before us with hands on her hips. Once she got our attention she said, "Gentlemen, it's only root beer!" Once we stopped laughing, waitress included, we asked her to guess our occupation. She failed. I'll never forget her response when we told her, "I didn't think Christians were allowed to have fun!"

At that moment I began to wonder where we had gone wrong. Why, in the view of the world, can't Christians have fun? What image do we have in the world? Could Peter be at fault?

Peter writes that we are to be "like obedient children." Now what do you think about when you hear those words? Most responded—following rules. We do think of being obedient as following a list of rules and regulations. Peter does ask for a change in lifestyle from their former lives but does that mean "fun" should be removed from the equation? He quotes Exodus 19:6 and Leviticus 11:44, "Be holy as I am holy." How can we be holy and have fun?

The Barna Research group headlines their weekly e-news letter this week with this headline: "Most Christians equate spirituality with following rules." The article states that 81% of the respondents agreed with this statement and 53% strongly agreed with it. They go on to note that most Christians have no idea what the church expects when it speaks of spiritual maturity. Fun did not figure in any of the equations! How can one be spiritually mature and have fun? I would rather ask, "How can one be spiritually mature and not have fun?"

When did we become so serious to the world? Remember, clowning had its origins within the church. It was okay to make fun (once in a while) and use something as exaggerated as clowns to bring home the Gospel message. However, the image of Christians is not as a fun loving people. We have the mystics, the contemplative orders, silent communities and those who live in the desert denying themselves most of the comforts of life of their time. There are those who would question why we have a game night and the validity of it. Should we not spend time in prayer and contemplation rather than having fun? Where does the Bible give us permission to play games?

A question: "What rules did Jesus give?" Where is his list of "do's and don'ts" for Christians? Now I did find one in John 13:35, "Love one another." But what does it mean to "love" one another? Once we ask that question we find ourselves where our ancestors were. After they had read the Ten Commandments someone asked, "What does it mean to keep the Sabbath holy?" or "What is work?" Thus began a long process to define (make rules) regarding what was or was not work. The result was the Mishnah, a multi-volume tome defining work, etc. They needed to know what was what so that they would know whether or not they were breaking the Law. One example is that you could anoint a wound on the Sabbath with only the amount of oil that would fill a thimble the size of a newborn baby's smallest toe. Talk about rules and regulations.

Our thinking is that we have to have rules to follow or else how will we know who is one of us.

Obedience and having fun is bound up in love. Peter adapts Jesus' words from John 13:35 in I Peter 1:22: "Love one another deeply from the heart" (NRSV) or "with a pure heart". The deepest form of love is our concern and care for one another. I mean, do we let those we love go hungry? Do we let those we love go homeless? Do we let those we love be bombed? Love, true love, brings us into a unique relationship with one another. Love means we bring out the best in each other.

Love means laughter as well as tears. Jesus laughed. Jesus attended parties. In fact, as Max Lucado points out in several of his books, people wanted Jesus at their parties (When God Whispers Your Name, p 19, for example). However, today most people would not think of inviting Jesus to a party because of the image the church has given him. Would you be comfortable playing games tonight if you knew Jesus was going to be there? The people wanted Jesus present. He knew how to have obedient fun! Where did we go wrong?

We need to reinvent our image: An image of Christians having fun and enjoying life. Yes, there is a world of hurt out there and in here. We need to remember that God has an eternity to fix it. We are learning that laughter heals. It can remove tension from a situation. We are created in God's image and if we laugh God must laugh. God looked at the created world and exclaimed the goodness of creation.

Peter concludes our Scripture lesson this morning with the fact the he brought to his hearers the Good News. Now who gets depressed when they get Good News? Good News brings celebrations, dancing, rejoicing. When we get Good News it is something we want to share with others, rejoice over and maybe even throw a party about. If we love, and God has loved us, then along with forgiveness and grace come joy and celebration.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates Isaiah 55:11-12 this way,

*So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into the whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause. No more thistles, but giant sequoias, no more thorn bushes, but stately pines—Monuments to me, to God, living and lasting evidence of God.*

Or, my paraphrase of our text from Isaiah (40:11) this morning:

*"God will throw a party, gathering the lambs into his arms, hugging them and celebrating their homecoming with a party."*

You don't believe me? Read again Luke 15. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son. Each parable celebrates the lost that has been found. The elder son refuses to come in – to the party – he hears the music and dance. Dad is throwing an unplanned party. Why? Because the prodigal has come home. God is having a party – let's join in.

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Peterson, Eugene, *The Message*, Navipress, 202  
Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989