

A Theology of Celebration | Hebrews 12:18-25, Psalm 103:1-8 | August 24 2025 at FPC LC

When I was in seminary, fairly early on, I got to talking with a student at the school who was studying something else. I don't remember what. What I do remember was that they asked me about what I was studying and when I told them, they told me about their background growing up.

And, real quick, while our focus should always be on all the stuff we're doing right, not what others are doing wrong, let me give you a bit of an idea. See, he asked me if I ever denied someone communion. I said no and he was pretty surprised by that. He asked me if women were in my program and if we let them lead anything at church. I told him that some of the best preachers, teachers, and pastors I know are women, so of course. He asked me if I ever told someone that they were going to hell. I think I told him "you know, we all get a little heated during rush hour. But, generally speaking, no. I'm in the business of loving folks, trying to be better myself, trying in whatever small way I can to better my community, and leaving all the rest to my Boss."

And usually, that type of answer goes fairly well for me. And really, I suspect if you're here today, you're kinda like me in that way. See, I like being at a church that's focused on God's love. I just do. I like it. I like being in a church that spends less time trying to condemn people and more time blessing people. I like being in a church that takes seriously our call to a faith that seeks understanding. So much so that I like that we can see in the Bible many of the hard stories and uncomfortable witnesses, and hold them in tension together with the overwhelming message of God's grace in Jesus Christ. We don't back down from scripture here, we don't twist it, we don't do much of anything like that. We just behold what God is doing and I really like that.

And of course, you know, just saying, I love the music here. I love the people. I love that in this transition sort of time, we're just seeing folks love on each other and build up whatever they can. And I'm gonna tell you about your super power, First Presbyterian Church. I love, love, love the fellowship and community of good Christians here. Amen?

But what I'm trying to get at today, what I was trying to tell the friend I had made that day some years ago, was that good theology matters. It matters. It just changes you when you understand better what it is you're worshipping. It matters when you worship the God made known in scripture from a place of awe and love, not fear and trembling. Because, really, in a sense, you become a lot like what you're worshipping.

And my new friend, he seemed to agree. But then, you know how it goes, he shook things up on me. See, he said "well, that's great. But if it's all grace and love and all that, if God really is infinitely merciful, then what's the point? Why go to church? Why be a pastor? If it's just about grace, then won't it just work out anyway?"

To be honest, I hadn't really thought about things the way he was talking about them. So, I mostly just listened as he went on to explain to me a little about his own personal relationship with God and his views on the Bible. He told me about some of his struggles there. But also, he just struck me as a good college kid. Like, he told me that he went to church growing up and thinks he got the idea. And given the 20 minutes or so we had spent there talking theology, I didn't see anything to the contrary.

And so, as we were getting ready to go our separate ways, I remember in particular that he thanked me. I remember because a small part of me felt really good about it. After all, I was early on in seminary and

someone had just said "thank you" to me for talking about theology, rather than "ok" or "wow, sounds neat, gotta go."

But when I think about it. I don't think about that part. Not mostly. Mostly, I think about him walking away. Because I viscerally remember the very next thought that popped into my head. I remember thinking "thanks for what? That guy isn't coming back to church."

Maybe when he has kids. Maybe when he's got some grey hairs and needs to figure it all out. You know, never say never. But, after talking to him, that's just the sense I got.

He was a fine young man and we lost him. He was a fine young man and upon hearing me present the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God's unfathomable grace to the best of my ability, he took me up on it as a true believer. But, at the same time, it was perplexing. It's as though sharing the depths of God's love with someone actually made them *less* likely to come to church. He just assumed it would all work out and so, why bother?

If you would, look with me at our Hebrews 12 passage. It may have an answer for us or at the very least, I think it understands what my friend there that day was going through. See, what's going on here, is that the author of Hebrews is comparing two different mountains wherein the mountains are metaphors for ways we could understand what God is up to.

And briefly, I need to be very clear about what's *not* going on in this passage. See, at first glance, we see one mountain that's surrounded by terror, gloom, and fear. And then we see another mountain full of celebration, love, grace, and so on. Which, I think today, we just call those two mountains the Sandias and the Organs, respectively (just kidding, but you know, go Aggies!).

But in all seriousness, what is not going on here is that these two mountains are not stand ins for current day Judaism and Christianity. They do make references to Moses and then to Jesus, but that's just not a good way to understand this passage. Similarly, these mountains are not a stand-in for the Old Testament versus the New Testament -- after all, both testaments are a testament to one immutable God who has both righteousness and mercy throughout. And just frankly, as a pastor, anytime I hear someone talk about the angry God of the Old Testament versus the loving God of the New Testament, I just go ahead and assume they haven't really read either.

But, see, instead, what this passage is talking about is two different ways we could think about God. See, this is talking about a God who shows us the law and a God who, in grace, Himself fulfills the law.

To put that another way, this is talking about the same exact God with the same exact character, but at two different points in His self-revelation, His showing up for His people as recorded in scripture. It implores us to consider that there was a time when God showed us, through the law, His expectation for human life. That's the first mountain. And it is scary because none of us are, in our broken and fallen human nature, able to accomplish it.

However, this second mountain then shows us the joy, the grace, the love, and the mercy when God Himself provided His own Son to fulfill that same law. That is, God, at great cost to Himself, included us anyway when we couldn't include ourselves.

Now, let me try saying that in just one more way because this passage really can throw us into some dangerous theological territory if we're not careful with it. This is not the God of the Old Testament versus the God of the New, this is not the God of Judaism versus the God of Christianity. What this is, is God who was in many ways concealed from us, now being the God who is revealed fully in Jesus. This is the God who showed us His expectation in the law and the same God who Himself fulfilled it in His Son.

Does that make sense? Are y'all still with me? This passage, more simply put, is just saying that we have a God who has expectations and who is graceful and shows up for His people. And we need to know that because, if you notice, immediately following the description of this second mountain, this description of what God is actually like as we know from His full presence in Jesus Christ, it has the same problem we do! It says "do not refuse" or do not neglect, do not wait until heaven and just assume it'll all work out because it's based in grace.

And to be clear, it's not saying that as a threat. Like, it's not saying that if you don't listen to Jesus now, God will then punish you. Although, you know, probably best not try your luck there. But, instead, what this is saying is that you have been invited to something incredibly good, something that will not be shaken eternally, and what's more, it did not come from you and it does not depend on you. You are not the main content of the Gospel, but God's Good News is that you are still included in it.

You all recall my college friend from some years ago? "If it's all grace and love and all that, if God really is infinitely merciful, then what's the point?"

Well, what Hebrews is telling us, what our Psalm reading is telling us in poetic form, what the point of church is, I think the point is a celebration. It's something like a party that demands a response with our whole lives. You have received the invitation, there's no denying that. So, will you join in with all the folks getting together, growing in our knowledge and love, building one another up, uplifting one another's gifts and sharing one another's burdens, putting on some great music, doing more together than we could do on our own, recalling for ourselves the immense good news that God is our Father and we are God's children, and that all that is a gift.

It isn't something we could even begin to earn if we tried. See, what this is, is our weekly call to take time apart and approach this holy mountain of grace and joy, to rest in it, to renew our perspective in it, to celebrate that we have been invited to an eternal, graceful, glorious reunion party of God and His people.

And I gotta tell you, I wish I had that answer so many years ago. I wish I could have told my friend that. I wish I could have told him that it's not just about escaping the bad, our faith is about delighting in the goodness of what God is up to.

See, too often in what I'd call "good theology churches," we have this real problem where we have too many good, hardworking Christians who just want to know what's next. We have a ton of folks who know in their head that we have a God who loves us in big, and deep, and wide kinds of ways. But then in our lives, there's a disconnect. Too often, we just want to know what we do, what the point is, what God is adding to our to-do list, how to grit our teeth and push on. And that's not totally bad but, see, it is kinda backwards to how the bible talks about things and it's just not what I'm asking of us today

Today, I just want us to understand that God has invited us to an eternal, unshakeable party and it demands a response. Now, the party does not depend on us. It can make use of us and that is a deep, deep honor. But, God does not depend on us. After all, there's nothing we *have* to do and there's nothing we have *to do*.

Instead, today's word is a word from God about what He's doing, the party He's throwing. And so, let me close by challenging us with this. We had before us two scripture readings today. And what I would love for you all to notice, my challenge to you all, is to see in them what we're bringing to the party and what God is bringing to the party.

If you do, you'll notice that Hebrews tells us that we have a living God who saves, who brings us home, who celebrates with us and all the angels, who acts as a good, objective, and merciful judge on our behalf, who grows us in grace and makes us more perfect than we were before, who Himself has entered into life with us and sacrificed Himself for us.

Further, in our Psalm, we learn this is the God who forgives us, who heals us, who pulls us out of the pits in our lives, who overflows into us with love and mercy, who give us good things and restores a youthfulness to us, who upholds the oppressed and downtrodden, who abounds with grace and love.

So, that's what God is doing. What do we do? Well, as far as I can tell, all Hebrews says is "don't refuse it." Our Psalm just says bless God's holy name with every fiber of your soul. In other words, just say yes. Just come to the party. Just be included and accepted because you are included and accepted.

And so, that's our call for today. First, say yes to how deeply God loves you, whether today is the first time you do that or the millionth. Say yes to God's love for you. For we are told here that God loves you in magnificent, eternal ways, well before you respond or act or perform or do better. Second, as a personal favor to me, if you feel like you've got that one down, find a neighbor here at church, maybe find a few, and celebrate this Good News with them too.

We have a God who fights for us, who goes ahead of us, who has prepared innumerable good and unshakeable gifts for His children. Today, just say yes and celebrate that.

Let's pray...

Loving God,

We rejoice that our lives are already consecrated by you.

Inspired by the knowledge of your love,
giving thanks for the gifts you offer us each day,

We ask that you would call us forth

Have us go out and rejoice in this world

Not because of what we do,

but because of who you are and what you have already done,

In your grace, include us not only as recipients of your invitation

But as messengers who get to share this Good News with all those who feel unknown and forgotten

Sharing your glorious invitation

As we long for and trust in your kingdom that cannot be shaken.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.