

INTRO - About 20 years ago St. John Lutheran in Palmer had just purchased property next to the church. We were having congregational picnics at St. John on our property beside the church. But, there are neighbors all around that property, who were watching church members eat and have fun. My wife said, she has the ideas, I usually get to put them into action. My wife said, we should have a picnic and invite the community, which we did. In fact, we marched in the Colony Days parade and handed out invitations. The picnic has gotten bigger over the years. The community supports it with donations. This year they used a clicker to count those they fed hot dogs, and hamburger, and slaw, and beans, and chips, and ice cream, and they counted, 2100 people. That is pretty exciting. But, is that what the church, the family of God, is about? Or, is it helping people get to heaven?

I. Listen to today's Gospel lesson. Verse 17 ff reads, **¹⁷The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" ¹⁸And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. ¹⁹Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."**

A. Jesus had sent 72 disciples out to prepare His way. They were to heal the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim the gospel.

1. They returned surprised, and excited at the results of their work. **."Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"**

2. But Jesus cautioned them. **do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."**

3. The real joy, the real victory, is eternal life. Jesus did not want these disciples to be distracted, to miss the real prize.

B. There are many things in life which distract God's people from the joy and love of God. Listen to Jesus words from the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:22..

1. **²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the CARES of the world and the deceitfulness of RICHES choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.**

2. The cares and riches of this world can seem more important than the message of the word.

3. Are there things in this world which can seem more important, or can distract you from the greatest joy, the love of God for sinners like us?

C. Yet, In our lesson, Jesus is not talking worldly issues, but spiritual distractions, casting out demons. Satan is deceitful, and can even use good to mislead.

1. If having our names written in heaven is the ultimate joy, the great prize, what can distract us?

2. Can a church BUILDING seem more important than the work of reaching people for Jesus? Can a BIG SUCCESSFUL EVENT, such as a picnic, seem more joyful than Jesus's love. Can our own HERITAGE seem more important than God's work? Bringing people to eternal life?

3. The disciples were warned not to be distracted from the joy of eternal life by casting out demons. What good, what church busy-ness can distract us?

II. In Matthew 13:45-46 Jesus tells another parable of the Pearl of Great Price. ⁴⁵ **"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.**

A. Casting out demons for the disciples, healing people, these were great signs.

1. But these are single battles in the great war against evil.

2. The greatest war is that of Satan against God and His people. The war has led us to pain, and death, and condemnation through sin.

3. Because of this war we have sinned and rebelled against God. On our own, we are lost forever.

B. But, Jesus took on the battle we cannot win.

1. Jesus has won this war with His sacrificial life, His suffering and death for all people, and His rising from the dead.

2. What we cannot accomplish, Jesus has done for us. He has won eternal life for each of us.

3. Peter writes about the value of Jesus' great victory, ¹⁸ . . . **you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.**

C. In Colossians 3:2-3, Paul echos today's words of Jesus about where we should focus.

1. ² **Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.**

2. This is the gift worth cherishing, worth pursuing.

III. Let me tell you about that picnic at St. John. One year Fritz, an elderly German man, watched the parade, came to the picnic, and started coming to church. He joined, and participated. Years later we buried, in faith him. Another year Cheryl attended the picnic. She and her grand children started coming to church. They were baptized. They attended confirmation. They were confirmed. They came to faith and have the gift of eternal life. When we keep the great prize in mind, sometimes the other parts of ministry can work to accomplish the work of God.

A. First, we have not EARNED the pearl of great price, eternal life. It is written in the book of God through the life, and death and resurrection of Jesus.

1. We can cherish that pearl

2. We can share that pearl.

B. Second, picnics, parades, church buildings, heritage, can distract. Or, they can be tools to do the work of God.

1. When we keep the great prize in mind, sometimes the other parts of ministry can work to accomplish the work of God.

2. So we listen to Jesus' warning and encouragement. **do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."**

CONCLUSION - On Friday there was a picnic, and hot dogs, and side dishes here at Our Redeemer. It was a big event, and took work from many people. That work can distract from the real pearl. That work can also point at the greatest joy. I saw people handing out hot dogs to people on floats, and walking. When God's people serve, they point to God, to Jesus, who came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many. When we point to Jesus, we point to the greatest joy, which lasts forever. **rejoice that your names are written in heaven."** And share that joy with others.

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How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1 a)

