

My favorite comedian asks, “Cake or death?” And then waits. Which would you choose, “cake” or “death?” And why is this funny? IS this question funny? “Cake or death?”

Maybe we wait all our lives for the punchline. Maybe we get distracted because the punchline is delayed, NEVER comes. So, we make the only obvious choice. “Cake, of course.” We choose cake, over and over again, and try to forget that “or death” awaits us. You know, that moment when we each will hear, “Sorry, YOU are all out of cake.”

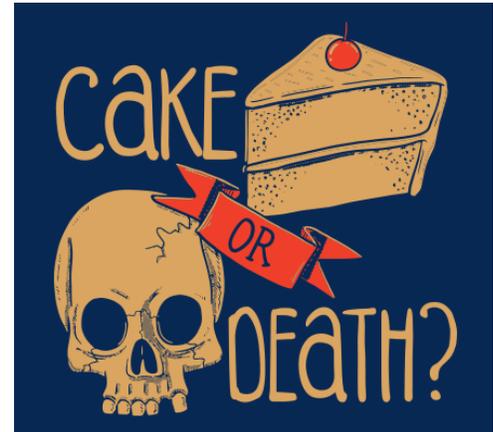
“Cake or death” is what our gospel is all about today. Jesus, speaking in a parable, was explaining to his disciples what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Notice that Jesus wasn’t talking about the Kingdom of God, the one he invites his disciples to create in the here and now. THAT kingdom is the Kingdom of God. THIS kingdom is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, maybe (possibly, perhaps, could be) those two kingdoms somehow come together in the “bye and bye.” But that’s a possibility to be considered on another day. Today we can be certain that Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, the place in which we hope to be together someday with Christ Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit after we run out of cake.

Can you imagine the scene in which Jesus is telling this parable to his disciples? Jesus and crew were gathered for coffee hour. Jesus’ time on earth was drawing short. He had told his disciples he would die in Jerusalem. Then he had entered that city riding on a donkey, inflaming the people’s messianic expectations. Jesus had condemned the Temple as a “Den of Robbers,” inflaming the chief priests’ rage. Then he had healed everyone in need, inflaming the Pharisees’ jealousy. Jesus then cursed a fig tree because it hadn’t borne fruit, and told last Sunday’s gospel lesson about a vineyard that had unscrupulous landlords, that God’s kingdom here would be taken from them and given to others.

And now this: cake or death. One doesn’t have to be a prophet to sense that Jesus’ time WAS running out. Jesus was giving his cake away to all who would take it. Jesus’ disciples seemed to be saying to him, “OK, since you seem to have a death wish, tell us what heaven is like and how do we get there, in case we are killed along with you?”

And Jesus told them, “Well, since you asked, heaven is like the party thrown by the richest person ever, because his son is coming home. At first the party’s host invited only his family, people he had



been supporting for years—people who owed him everything. But none of them even RSVP'd, much less attended the party. Somehow, they had begun to think they were entitled to everything he had given them. So, they ignored him and his invitation.

Oh, they had their reasons, I'm sure. Sunday softball. The crossword puzzle. Croissants. Parents. Grandkids. Too old. Too young. Too ill. Too healthy. Great weather. Lousy weather. Etc.

Consequently, the party is now open to everyone. WE are invited; all we need do is accept the invitation. But, Jesus warned, we need to be sure to dress appropriately.

“This isn't fair,” we complain. “How are we supposed to get the right clothes if we've been invited in off the street.” We forget that this is a metaphor. What Jesus meant is that we are to robe ourselves in righteousness to gain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Not because our good works can get us into heaven, but because not doing good works can get us uninvited, according to Jesus.

Actually, the reality is more fundamental than that. We do God's work because we love God and we love his son Christ Jesus. And, loving God, we WANT to do what is pleasing to God. If we don't, then we are imposters at the party and deserve to be ejected.

All this parable talk, this metaphor, is quite theoretical and indirect. Here's what living into heaven is like in real life. There's a certain radical generosity about living into the party. And when we let go and risk doing the right but audaciously risky thing for God, amazing things will happen. Every time.

Here's the best example I know. There was a man, I'll call him John. He was a devout disciple of Christ. He attended church at least twice a week, prayed each day, gave of the time and considerable talent and treasure that God had given him in this life. Yes, John had been given a LOT of cake. Then came cancer, for the third time, and his doctors told him he only had six months left. Then John amazed us all, his fellow parishioners.

He called his estranged wife, who had wronged him, asked her to forgive him, and asked her to spend his last six months helping him to make amends to all who had wronged him, who he still had held unforgiveness in his heart. Being a holy person herself, she agreed. And, one by one, they called in those who owed John money and he forgave them the debts they owed him. They called those who all those who had disappointed John and he told them how much they had given to him in this life. In short, he let all his animosities go. He practiced radical generosity, radical forgiveness. Then the most amazing thing happened: John found life abundant with which to face death. “I don't know why I didn't do this years ago,” he testified. “I feel so free.”

Who will you give YOUR cake to? You know you can't take cake with you to heaven. And you don't need to, because heaven is full of cake; heaven is all cake. There is no "or death" there. (No more dying there; no more crying there. We're going to see the king!) And we've all been invited, if not on the original guest list, then in the substitute group. But an invitation is still an invitation. And all we have to do is just say "yes." And then live as if heaven were already here.

Cake, or death?