

Eucharist
Church Divinity School of the Pacific
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John 12: 44-50

Then Jesus cried aloud: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me."

My wife and I missed church on Sunday. We were going to go, really we were! In fact, we were in our car on our way. Now, it's true that we had left the house a little later than we should have if we were going to make it by 10:30 over to Alameda, the island community where our little church is located. You can only get there across a few bridges or in downtown Oakland through the Alameda Tube. On some Sundays we would be stalled by a passing train, and we crossed our fingers this wouldn't happen to us today.

But when we got to 35th and Foothill Blvd. a police car blocked our route and we realized that we had forgotten it was the day when Cinco de Mayo would be celebrated with a parade on International Blvd. So we turned right and made our way down to High Street, where we figured we would bypass the parade and make our way to Alameda across the High Street Bridge. No such luck! Just as we were coming up on International Blvd, we discovered that way was blocked too. We had come to a total halt just at the start of the parade.

"OK, it's already 10:27. Even if we get ourselves turned around and make our way downtown to the tube, there's no way we're going to get to church less than maybe 20 minutes late. So why don't we park the car in the Kragen Auto parking lot right here and go see what we can see?"

We walked over to the parade route, and it was as though we had just been instantly transported into Mexico City. Families with little kids in strollers, some with portable chairs, waited patiently at curbside, everyone speaking Spanish. Covies of teenage boys strolled along showing off their pecs and pulling up their shirts to show their abs. Camcorders were out and at the ready. Mexican flags were waving everywhere. Of course, I had to buy one. I thought maybe I could bring it here today to add a little local color. Someone was making announcements in Spanish kitty corner across the intersection over a loudspeaker in the parking lot of Super Mercado y Carniceria Mi Tierra.

Eventually four little girls carrying a somewhat sagging banner stepped off and the parade began. There were the cars of local politicians waving cheerily at the crowd—led off by our

member of congress, Barbara Lee. There were some bands and a drum and bugle corps. Cohorts of baseball players in their uniforms, representing an Hispanic Baseball League, ambled lazily along. In the intersection of High and International Blvd. an Oakland police car began wildly driving in a circle, its siren tooting on and off, and soon we recognized that the police car was a low-rider, and when it drove in front of us it was lurching and bouncing up and down while a uniformed officer in the passenger seat shouted out to the crowd, "Viva Mexico!" The violins, guitars, and barbershop quartet-like voices of a Mariachi band sang forth across the street while its trumpets, added their machine gun staccato. I shouldn't forget the horses. Some of them were ridden sidesaddle by women in elegant dress--a couple of them carrying little girls on their laps. One little boy who didn't look much older than 7 or 8 was riding a pony. A troop of little girls passed by dressed as traditional dancers with feathers on their heads and fringes of metal tubes dangling and tinkling from their skirts. Another group all in wheelchairs came along, with signs that said things like "Disabled people are not useless" in Spanish and English. And there was the end of the parade, a flat bed truck, with colorful balloons and paper flowers and a sign that said "Fiesta." Sitting atop the cab of the truck was a woman wearing a fluffy red headdress, a feather-covered bra and a glittery silver g-string. Behind her maybe 15 or 20 young people were dancing exuberantly to rock music and throwing confetti and candy to the crowd.

The parade had proceeded at a less than snail's pace, more standing than moving, so I began to wonder whether the planners wanted to stretch it out. It lasted about an hour, but might have passed in 15 minutes if it had moved at a jaunty clip. But it was a warmly moving, simple, unpretentious, small-town-like event, something for families, something to feel good about.

When Judy and I got home with our new Mexican flag I got on the web to look up cinco de mayo and to find out what we were celebrating. It was the defeat on this day in 1862 of 6,500 French troops, who were marching to Mexico City in hopes of establishing French rule over Mexico.

The French Army had not been defeated in 50 years, and it invaded Mexico with the finest modern equipment and a newly reconstituted Foreign Legion. The French were not afraid of anyone, especially since the U.S. was embroiled in its own Civil War.

Marching toward Mexico City the French army encountered strong resistance. Near the city of Puebla a small, poorly armed militia estimated at 4,500 men was able to stop and defeat a well outfitted French army and stop the invasion of their country. The victory was a glorious moment for Mexican patriots. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans celebrate it each year on the Fifth of May. When I told my wife that I was going to preach about this today, she said, "What does Cinco de Mayo have to do with John 12?" I said, "No problem. I have till Wednesday to figure that out."

It's not so hard really. Imagine the different ways a person could think about cinco de mayo. There will be some Americans who wish we didn't have to deal with it at all. They might be driving along 35th in Oakland on their way to Alameda and discover the police roadblock. They realize they are going to have to drive far out of their way to get across the estuary and probably be late to wherever they are heading, and they might get mightily upset. More upset, in fact, if they don't want the Mexicans here in the first place, if they resent all those Spanish signs plastered around our town, if they voted or wished they could vote to make English our official language, if they get upset whenever an election rolls around when they see the ballots printed in several languages, if they are upset and angry that their country, as they put it, is being over-run by foreigners.

Others might think of cinco de mayo as little more than a commercial opportunity. Plenty of businesses cashed in on the parade as a way to get their name before the public. One big truck was even a rolling ad for a billboard company. Lots of people had booths set up to sell stuff. Entrepreneurial folk roamed the crowds with flags or pushed little carts with popsicles to sell. Wherever there are lots people gathered in one place, lots of people feeling good and ready to celebrate, there is money to be made. Cinco de mayo could be seen as a commercial opportunity.

Or you might think of cinco de mayo as someone else's celebration. You could watch the parade like a tourist gawking at something considered exotic and foreign. Whether you smugly distanced yourself or found the whole event curiously fascinating, you could maintain in yourself the sense that you are different from these people, that you are tolerant of their eccentricities and proud to live in a country that permits them to express their "culture." But you are secretly glad that you are not them and that cinco de mayo is theirs and not yours.

The Gospel of John suggests a different way of looking at everything. Jesus says, "Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness." You want to know what God is like; look at Jesus. If you feel dim-witted when you ask about the meaning of life, look at Jesus and be enlightened.

And when we look at Jesus what do we see? In this particular Gospel Jesus performs signs, by which he reveals God's nature. At a wedding celebration he supplies the best wine. (Jesus apparently enjoys and promotes fiestas.) He drives the profiteers out of the temple warning not to make his father's house into a shopping mall. (Jesus repudiates the commercialization of all of life.) He shocks people by conversing with a woman, and a Samaritan at that. (Jesus ignores the barriers that separate people and set groups apart from one another.) He heals the blind and does it on the sabbath. (For Jesus health and healing take precedence over conventional rules and religious norms.) He feeds the masses from a boy's lunchbox. (Jesus reveals a world of abundance with enough to go around for everyone, a world where no one needs to be deprived of life's necessities.) He turns the world upside down. He violates conventional norms and practices. He challenges worn assumptions. As such, he is light for the world, life abundant. He creates the world as fiesta.

From this perspective Oakland's cinco de mayo celebration last Sunday did not obstruct our getting to church; it was our church. It was not their quaint party, it was our church. It was a ritualized parable of the story of Jesus, which is our story. It's a story of strangers in a foreign land finding a place and making it their own and throwing a party, and that is our story. It's a story of mammas and pappas and little children sharing a sunny day together, of teens and granddads strutting their stuff, sharing high fives, feeling alive and happy. That is something all of us everywhere want for ourselves. It's ritualized music and dance and prayers—"Viva Mexico!"—and those are our prayers, our music, our dance, as well. Even when it is not explicitly stated, cinco de mayo commemorates the story of the defeat in Puebla of the great and mighty by the humble—"God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." It is our story. It is Jesus' story. It is God's story.

Of course, it's hard to believe that story. When you read the papers each day and you catalogue the latest distortions and manipulations issuing from the White House, it's hard to hold on to trust in a God who creates the world as fiesta, a world that brings people together to share a

common feast. It's so easy to fall into cynical despair that the world is nothing more than an arena in which combatants jockey to see who can make the fastest buck, and in which the cards are stacked in favor of the few against the many. The darkness thickens, threatening to overcome the light.

Jesus says, "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them. I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge."

To follow Jesus is to live in the light even in the midst of deep darkness. It's to grasp life as fiesta, even in the midst of war, violence, and terror. It is ironic and moving that the fiesta last Sunday, with its mood of exhilaration, play, and high delight, took place on an Oakland street which has often enough been the scene of violent crime and drive-by shootings. On cinco de mayo that street is reclaimed for life and light, for hope and joy and celebration.

I think that, when Jesus says he doesn't judge people who reject his words, but that the words themselves stand as their judge, he means that those who hid in their homes last Sunday and refused to join the celebration on International Blvd. have suffered their own judgment. Hemmed in by their fears and their mistrust of the world, they have consigned themselves to the darkness. They have blinded themselves to the light. They have deprived themselves of the joy. And one day maybe they will look back and see how futile and self-defeating it was to lose their lives in the darkening gloom, when they might have danced brassily and boldly out in the bright light of day.

That really is our choice. In a frightening, unjust world, where it often enough seems the principalities and powers will finally have their way, we can descend into the darkness of despair. Or we can challenge the powers, rise up against the mighty and lift up the lowly, join in sharing the food and drink of our eucharistic fiesta, and on this cinco de mayo even join our prayers to the revelers' "Viva Mexico!" For in so doing we are living in the light and embracing the life in all its fullness that comes only from our good and gracious God. Amen.