

Feasting on Joy
Philippians 4:4-7
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Think back to some of the most enjoyable times of your life and probably many of them will involve food, and friends or family. The family gathered around the table for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. A backyard barbeque with good friends. A picnic in the park watching happy people enjoying a beautiful day. A dinner party in someone's home. One of ECF's Fellowship Dinners. The Lord's Supper surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ. I know that for me, some of my deepest experiences of joy have come as either a guest or a host at a meal of some kind. There is something about eating together that feeds the soul even as it fills the stomach. Is it any wonder then that Jesus referred so often to the act of eating in his parables – the wedding feast, the fattened calf, the king's banquet, and all the rest? Is it any wonder that so many of his miracles revolved around the provision of food – the feeding of the five thousand, the breakfast of fish he prepared for the disciples on the beach after the resurrection, the meal shared after the healing of Peter's mother? Is it any wonder that he spent so much time dining with people who needed to experience joy in their lives? And last, but not least, could the memorial celebration of Jesus' life have gone any other way than around the table with good bread and good wine and good friends?

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” says the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi, “again I will say rejoice.” I have to say that I picture Paul writing this or dictating this letter, with its bountiful references to joy, after his evening meal in prison. How else could he have found the joy within to share in his words if not in a meal, perhaps taken with trusted friends like Timothy and Epaphroditus whom he commends to the Philippians. Paul’s confinement was probably not like we imagine prison life today with rows of cells patrolled by armed guards, a break in the prison yard for exercise, and tasteless food slopped onto a tray, but it was still confinement. To be sure, he was limited to being in that house, but he was not in solitary confinement. As a Roman citizen, Paul was likely under house arrest when he wrote Philippians, as we read about in the book of Acts, and so he was able to receive visitors, and conduct his affairs. And so I picture him looking forward to meals shared with those who came to visit, and deriving great joy and strength from them. At these times he would remember fondly the churches he founded and make plans with his friends to continue to support them, to share his joy with them, hoping he might one day visit them again.

Be that as it may, there are no references to food in this letter, and only a few to hospitality, and none in the passage we are looking at tonight. But there is joy throughout. And peace. And the presence of the Lord. And where there are joy and peace and the presence of God, food cannot be too far away. And how do I know that? Well, because Robert Farrar Capon says so. Capon, a theologian who

probably writes about the relationship between faith and food better than anyone, envisions the very beginning of the world as the result of the three persons of the Trinity having a food fight, or at least playing with their food. Listen to this great description of the beginning of the world.

“Let me tell you why God made the world. One afternoon, before anything was made, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit sat around in the unity of their Godhead discussing one of the Father’s fixations. From all eternity, it seems, he had had this thing about being. He would keep thinking up all kinds of unnecessary things - new ways of being and new kinds of beings to be. And as they talked, God the Son suddenly said, “Really, this is absolutely great stuff. Why don’t I go out and mix us up a batch?” And God the Holy Spirit said, “Terrific! I’ll help you.” So they all pitched in, and after supper that night, the Son and the Holy Spirit put on this tremendous show of being for the Father. It was full of water and light and frogs; pinecones kept dropping all over the place, and crazy fish swam around in the wineglasses. There were mushrooms and mastodons, grapes and geese, tornadoes and tigers - and men and women everywhere to taste them, to juggle them, to join them, and to love them. And God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, “Wonderful! Just what I had in mind! Tov! Tov! Tov!” And all God the Son and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was the same thing: “Tov! Tov! Tov!” So they shouted

together “Tov meod!” and they laughed for ages and ages, saying things like how great it was for beings to be, and how clever of the Father to think of the idea, and how kind of the Son to go to all that trouble putting it together, and how considerate of the Spirit to spend so much time directing and choreographing. And for ever and ever they told old jokes, and the Father and the son drank their wine in *unitate Spiritus Sancti*, and they all threw ripe olives and pickled mushrooms at each other *per omnia saecula saeculorum*, Amen. It is, I grant you, a crass analogy; but crass analogies are the safest. Everybody knows that God is not three old men throwing olives at each other. Not everyone, I’m afraid, is equally clear that God is not a cosmic force or a principle of being or any other dish of celestial [pudding]¹ we might choose to call him. Accordingly, I give you the central truth that creation is the result of a Trinitarian bash, and leave the details of the analogy to sort themselves out as best they can.”

Whether or not the Apostle Paul could ever have imagined such a divine fiesta, I am certain he would agree that a central characteristic of the divine, of God, and certainly the Christian life, is joy. And although there are a great many ways and places to experience joy, around the table is one of the best. Perhaps it is because we see God’s provision for us in all the great diversity of foods, in their

¹ Capon uses the word “blancmange.”

infinite colors and textures and varieties. Perhaps it is because someone has labored over what is set before us on the table, lovingly prepared it, spent hours on it, just for us. Perhaps it is because when sit at the table, we must put down our weapons, because it is very hard to eat a leg of lamb in one hand with a sword in the other. Perhaps it is because we are seated, and therefore at rest after a long day's work, or a long journey to arrive. Perhaps it is because as we look around the table we see others in whose eyes we can see God smiling. And then we experience the peace of God that passes all understanding, and we don't worry about anything, and we rejoice, and we know that the Lord is near. And isn't all of that just what Paul exhorts the Philippians to do.

The nearness of the Lord has long been the subject of interest with respect to the Lord's Supper. Differences of opinion about the nature of Christ's presence at that meal are one of the reasons the Protestant church has as many variations as it does. The traditional Roman Catholic view was that when the bell rang during the mass, the bread and wine literally became the body and blood of Jesus, they were transubstantiated, to use the technical term, and for this reason, you still see today the priest handling very carefully the bread and wine, since they are Jesus. The reformer Martin Luther disputed that bodily view, but maintained that although the bread and wine did not become Christ, Christ was present within them physically in some radically inherent way, and that they could not be separated, that Christ was that near. They called that consubstantiation. Another reformer, Ulrich

Zwingli, argued that the Lord's Supper was not an occasion of Christ's actual presence, but was merely a memorial celebration, doing as Jesus called upon us to do, remembering him each time we eat. John Calvin, as he often did, took more of a middle way, and rejected both the absence of Christ at the meal, but also his physical presence and settled on the idea that as we break the bread and lift the cup, Christ is spiritually present with us. Despite all the differences, however, with the possible exception of Zwingli's view, what they all have in common is that they recognize, like Paul says, that "the Lord is near."

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is, to use traditional Protestant language, a sign and seal of God's grace. We do not, when we eat and drink it, imbibe grace, or ingest it like some kind of vitamin. Rather, as we recall what God did for us in Jesus Christ, how Jesus gave himself fully for us, we experience once again the grace of that event. It is confirmed for us once again, it comforts our troubled and doubting hearts, it assures us of Christ's continuing presence in our lives, it gives us "the peace that passes all understanding." Hopefully, even though we generally celebrate it in a more somber and solemn fashion, the Lord's Supper also brings us joy, for, as we are reminded at the invitation, this is the joyful feast of the people of God, one we celebrate now and look forward to celebrating for all eternity in the Kingdom of God. You see, what we celebrate in the Sacrament is God's grace come to life and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and it is that grace which makes possible all that Paul exhorts the Philippians to do and be as Christians.

There is no joy without grace, there is no gentleness without grace, there is no thanksgiving without grace, no peace without grace.

Tonight, I would like to leave the last word with Robert Capon who really seems to get what grace is all about. This is what he says: “Grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celebrants in the world. It is a floating, cosmic bash shouting its way through the streets of the universe, flinging the sweetness of its [serenade]² to every window, pounding at every door in a hilarity beyond all liking and happening, until the prodigals come out at last and dance, and the elder brothers finally take their fingers out of their ears.” That sounds like joy to me, the kind in which Paul, even in his confinement, could imagine and preach two thousand years ago. Again tonight, let us feast on joy at the joyful feast. Amen.

² Capon uses the word “cassations.”