

Is The Lord's Supper So Serious That We Can't Smile While Partaking?

Questions from the Floor II (4th sermon in the series)

I Peter 1: 3-21
September 5, 2010
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Prayer: Healing, sovereign God, overmatch our resistant ears with your transforming speech. Penetrate our jadedness and fatigue. Touch our yearnings with your words, and draw us closer to you. Amen. (From Walter Brueggemann, Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth)

“How can we keep the Lord's Supper special and meaningful?” the questioner asked. But there was a follow up question: “Is the Lord's Supper so serious that we can't smile while partaking?”

The late Dr. Paul Pruyser of the Menninger Foundation once wrote:

As a ruling elder and an observing psychologist, I have often had the opportunity, while serving the communion elements to members of a Presbyterian congregation, of watching people closely as they participate in the church's great and reputedly most joyous celebration ... Far from reflecting joy and gladness at this love feast, the facial expressions, gestures, postures, rigid musculature and slightly bent necks of many participants suggest a stiff ... depressed ... or frozen state of mind ...

... what prevails is a somber, half-choked atmosphere which tends to lift noticeably ... at the end of the service, when the worshippers linger in front of the church building chatting a little more amiably than usual, or telling jokes ... When this is the effect of a festive ceremony on many worshippers, what sense does the word 'joy' have?”¹

The words of invitation in our liturgy announce that “This is the joyful feast of the people of God!” But in what sense is the feast joyful? And how might a sense of joy help make our celebration more special? More meaningful?

Not only in worship, but often in our lives, we Christians can be an awfully dour lot. If not wholly true, that is certainly the perception of us Presbyterians, going back as far as old John Calvin himself, who, admittedly, did not have a whole lot to smile about! I'm not suggesting we carry on a supercilious atmosphere of lightheartedness and superficiality, that we try to adopt the “entertainment” model of smiley televangelists, that we gloss over the weighty problems that we may bear as if they were nothing. But ours is a religion of hope and there should be some evidence that we are people with hope, who have heard and believe a message of God's love which is joyful and encouraging.

This contradiction is especially evident in the Lord's Supper, a sacrament that has as its backdrop the Passover meal that Jesus ate with his disciples. The mood that night was obviously somber. Jesus was about to be betrayed. Later in the garden, he was arrested and subsequently crucified. The bread of this meal is broken and, as it is, we remember Jesus' words, "This is my body broken for you." A cup is lifted and we remember how his blood was shed for our sake. This is serious business. Here we remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as he dies for our salvation.

But there are many moods to the communion that we celebrate as the Lord's Supper. There is a somber mood on Maundy Thursday, and at the beginning of Lent. But there is a joyful spirit to communion in the Easter season and Christmas Eve, and even on All Saints Sunday when we give thanks for all the saints who have gone before us and who are forevermore with God. There will be a hopeful mood the first Sunday next month, World Communion Sunday, because it makes us think of the global community of people who will celebrate the bread and wine of God's love shed and poured out for our sake.

In addition to that, recent biblical scholars have contended that when Jesus said "Do *this* in remembrance of me," he wasn't simply talking about breaking bread that night with 12 disciples. Rather "this" meant all those times that he amazed and scandalized others by feeding the 5,000, eating with sinners, breaking bread with tax collectors, tearing down social barriers at the table; all of those were sacramental, in a sense.

And finally, our communion is not just a looking back, but a looking forward, to that day in which people will come from east and west and north and south and sit at Table with our Lord. It's what we call a "Eucharistic feast," in which we anticipate a joyful reunion and feast with all the saints that have preceded us. "I come with joy," the hymn sings.

You know, it's interesting that a quick scan of a concordance will show that "happiness" is a word that appears only once in the Bible, but "joy" appears 172 times. The Bible is not much on happiness, but there is a lot to be said about joy. Happiness is such an ephemeral thing, and so much happiness depends on our fickle moods. One moment we are happy and then we are not. A new toy, a tasty meal, a good joke, a comfortable chair, an evening at home, a football victory, or a loyal dog can make us happy ... for a short time.

But joy is a deeper emotion, something more abiding and enduring than the pleasurable feelings that make us cheerful. And joy is actually only coincidental with happiness. Because sometimes you can be joyful even though what is happening around you is not all that happy.

Like at funerals. Think of someone you have loved ... a parent, a spouse, a child, a person who touched your life in some special way that can never be replaced. We think of them with affection, and there is an odd mixture of missing them, and loving them, and wishing they were here, but along with all that a feeling that is good about the memory, a joyfulness to have it, and a thankfulness for its comfort. That's what joy is like.

[Joy is the confidence that we have in God that our lives are lived with an undergirding that will not fail, that underneath are the everlasting arms, the confidence that not all is up to us to accom-

plish alone, that we cannot foresee everything, nor prepare the future with a vision that is greater than today's sightings, nor plan tomorrow's journey with certainty. And that's not all bad. It is the good news that we are only human, and that is enough to be.]

Joy is the goodness of seeing life come full circle. We have a lot of weddings here, and at the rehearsal Diane Wellford and Margaret Ann Eikner tell the bride and groom that the recessional is different from the processional, and to go down the aisle quickly. I often tell them to remember there's a party coming up, a reception, so be nimble, get on with it.

Last year, there was a wedding in which the bride and groom, the bridesmaids and ushers, the parents and all had gone on their way, and the moment came for the grandmother of the groom to be escorted out. Of course the whole congregation was sitting there waiting. And the usher came down the aisle, and very carefully waited at the pew for the grandmother, dressed to the nines, to rise and work her way out to the aisle. She grabbed her cane gingerly and slowly, ever so slowly, and on the arm of that young man she walked down the aisle, leaning on her cane, and leaning heavily on the usher who walked with her. It took her a long time to get to the back of the church. But no one wanted to rush her and no one would have anyway. That grandmother of the groom, going slowly up the aisle because of all that time and life's events do to us, carried with her the joy of life come full circle. The marriage of a grandson, the legacy of her life going on. That is joy, the comfort of seeing life come full circle.

But the deepest joy of all, the joy of our faith, celebrated at this table is even more than that because it has to do with the hope that we have in Jesus, whose life and death and resurrection has given us the confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God in him.

It's that joy that the author of the letter of I Peter speaks of when he addresses persecuted Christians in northern Asia:

By his great mercy God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials ... Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

That is why this is the joyful feast of the people of God, and that is why at the heart of things we Christians can be joyful. Even though there are trials and sufferings in this life, we can be joyful. Even though we are not always happy, ephemeral thing that happiness is, even though we have worries, fears, and angers that eat us up, even though we are troubled by our anxieties, at the very heart of our faith is the joyful confidence that we have been given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and so been given an inheritance of eternal life that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for us.

In the face of that, I don't know that laughter is called for, nor that you should paste on a smile when you are really quite sad. I'm not sure that a grin is the appropriate thing to wear, nor that a beaming countenance is what is called for, but deep within us there ought to be some place where we can take heart and be joyful, because of the good that God intends for us, because of the love that God bears for us, because of the extent to which God has gone to express God's love for us. It is, as Peter says, an indescribable and glorious joy.

So how can we make the Lord's Supper more meaningful? By partaking of it over and over and over again. Remember Max Beerbohm's Happy Hypocrite, the wicked man who wore the mask of a saint to woo and win the saintly girl he loved? Years later when a castoff girl friend discovered the ruse, she challenged him to take off the mask in front of his beloved and show his face for the sorry thing it was. He did what he was told only to discover that underneath the saint's mask, his face had become the face of a saint.

How can we make it more meaningful? By varying the ways that we serve communion. At the 11:00 service, half the time we serve by intinction, half the time by remaining in our seats. There is meaning to both. When we are served in our pews, we are reminded that there is absolutely nothing that we need to do to earn God's favor. Nothing. When we serve by intinction and come to the stations to receive the bread and the cup, we are reminded that though God's grace is freely offered, we do need to receive it. We take a significant piece of bread, because, after all, God's grace is abundant! I would ask that you be open to both.

How can we make it more meaningful? We participate in the Great Prayer. We learn by memory those opening words: "The Lord be with you." "And also with you." "Lift up your hearts." "We lift them up to the Lord." "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." "It is good to give thanks and praise to God." We do that, and the words become ingrained in us, a part of us, and we begin to live thankful lives. And all meals become sacramental.

Fred Buechner says that to eat any meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic need. "It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin or to keep your distance when asking for the tomato ketchup. We meet at the level of our most basic humanness, which involves our need not just for food but for each other. I need you to help fill my emptiness just as you need me to help fill yours."²

So is it OK to smile while partaking? If it is authentic. If it is real. But what is going on in our hearts is far more important than what is on our faces.

So take heart; be of good cheer, come to the joyful feast of the people of God. For this is a day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.

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¹ Paul D. Pruyser, "Joy" (*The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 1966, Vol XX), p. 90.

² Frederick Buchner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper, 1973. P. 52.