

“Come to the Joyful Feast” – October 4, 2015

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In October of 2009 – almost exactly six years ago – my family experienced a truly incredible day. It was one of those days you wish could last forever, one of those rare events that helps to define the entirety of your life on this earth. In February of 2009 I found my mom’s 2 half-brothers in Oklahoma. Mom’s parents divorced when she was five, and both remarried soon after. Her father gave up all rights and custody. When Mom tried to contact her father by letter back in the early 70’s, she received a chilly response along with the message that she had two half-brothers but that they knew nothing about her. Her father and step-mother wanted to keep it that way.

Mom let it drop, but throughout my life I was intrigued by the enigma of these two men, my uncles. Who were they? Did they have children – did I have cousins? What were their likes and dislikes, their personalities? They were my blood, my kin. And since I have such a small family, I longed to know them. When I worked for a private investigator, I was able to use some of our internet software to locate them, but caution kept me from making contact. What if they never knew about Mom? Would they dismiss my request for a connection just like Mom’s father dismissed hers? For nearly 10 years I struggled with whether to contact them or not.

Finally I decided to send letters to both of them. I was not prepared for the response. They were absolutely thrilled. In an end of life confession, their father finally admitted to them they had a half-sister, but gave them absolutely no details. Since the mid-80’s the two brothers had searched in vain. Talk of a reunion started quickly, but Mom’s sudden diagnosis of lung cancer put all those plans on hold. Then finally the reunion was able to take place in October. They flew to Indianapolis and we had one day to catch up on a lifetime.

How do you capture an event such as this into mere words? None of us ever believed this meeting would ever take place. We found that they had the same reservations about us as we had of them, wondering if their sister would even care. Something powerful took place on Friday. A reunion, but so much more than that. A coming together. The creation of wholeness from broken parts. The answering of questions long gone unanswered. A time of great emotion, of thankfulness and rejoicing and celebration. And one more question, would John Best have wanted his children to finally meet. And the answer they came up with was yes.

Now I tell you all this story because I think in many ways what happened to my family on that amazing day is illustrative of what takes place whenever Christian believers gather to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Communion is indeed a celebration, a time of thankfulness, a time of drawing together the family of God with one another and with

Jesus Christ. It is a remembrance, it is a celebration, it is an anticipation of the future, it is spiritual nourishment, it is a mending of brokenness, and it is a mystery. It is indeed a joyful feast.

Since today is World Communion Sunday, I thought it would be a good idea for us to reexamine why we take Communion and what happens when we do so. Sometimes we get into a routine of doing something and we don't always know the significance of what we are doing. Different Christian traditions have various understandings regarding the Lord's Supper. The Presbyterian Church follows the Reformed tradition and especially the teachings of John Calvin. Calvin emphasized that the sacrament of Communion is an act of God, not ordered by people. We humans are participants in what God is doing. It is a sign by which God strengthens the faith of believers. We are nourished in our faith.

Calvin relied on his understanding of the Jewish Passover in trying to explain the meaning of the Lord's Supper. When Jews celebrate the Passover, they see it as sign from God as the continuing reality of the Exodus experience. They don't understand themselves as going back in time to remember an event of their history, that of Moses leading the Hebrew away from the slavery in Egypt and toward the Promised Land. Instead in a mysterious way, when the Jews celebrate Passover, they are somehow made one with their ancestors in the midst of the activity. The Exodus is ongoing.

In the same way, said Calvin, when Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper we are not simply remembering the event of Jesus in the Upper Room with his disciples before his death and resurrection. Indeed in the taking of Communion we are made one with Christ. Jesus Christ is truly present with us when we partake of the bread and wine. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and united with Jesus Christ. A mystery to be sure.

Christ is present in the elements of Communion. The "how" of it is the mystery. We are united with Jesus Christ as we share in this table. Look at it this way. If you just see a loaf of bread sitting on a table, your hunger isn't abated until you actually eat it. In a similar way, according to Calvin, it is the action of participating in communion that nourishes our spiritual selves, not just looking at this table before us.

Calvin himself confessed the mystery. He writes: "Now if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience it than understand it. Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his

blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such bread.” (IV.xvii.32 quoted from *Reformed Worship*, p. 68)

We want to understand it. Our logical, answer-seeking post-Enlightenment minds want to wrap our brains around the action. Can we not learn to become satisfied with the mystery? Somehow, the Holy Spirit brings us into the presence of Jesus Christ as we partake of this Holy Meal. Let that be enough for now.

In our tradition we understand three purposes or uses of this sacrament. To confirm faith, to stir thankfulness, and to build community.

In confirming our faith, the sacrament teaches us that Christ’s body, once a sacrifice for us on the cross, is now and always available to us. God loves us. We know that. But the elements of communion are a concrete, tangible witness of that love. In partaking of the bread, Christ’s body, we become strengthened. Our spiritual selves are nurtured, so that we may have courage to face whatever comes our way.

The sacrament also awakens our thankfulness. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving. As we try to take in this understanding that Christ is truly made one with us, how can we respond other than in thankfulness? Unlike any other creature, we humans can respond to God’s graciousness with thanks. We owe everything to God. Our life, our sustenance, our future. When we realize this and truly acknowledge this, then we naturally react with gratitude. In this table, God feeds us. What an amazing thing! Perhaps then we should come to this table with a deep attitude of celebration. Look what God has done for us!

This is where we Presbyterians pretty much fall flat. We are not overly given to emotional displays of joy and celebration. But this is the joyful feast of the people of God. We are joyful in our gratitude. So many times we come to this table with a serious, almost somber attitude. We focus on the death of Christ, but somehow seem to forget that this is also a resurrection meal. This is the foretaste of the great banquet that awaits us all in the fulfillment of God’s kingdom.

The sacrament of communion, like this name implies, also fosters the building of community. As we share in this meal, we are truly united with all believers – past, present and future – who join us in this sharing. This is especially emphasized on World Communion Sunday, as we recognize and acknowledge all who are partaking this day. Christians all over the world are celebrating communion today and our connectedness in Christ’s church. It is this unification in Christ and in one another that we are reminded of how we should be loving and caring for each other. Not just in this

community, but all Christians everywhere. We belong to each other and we belong to Christ. We are connected. The table is prepared. Let us come to this joyful feast.