

*THE JOYOUS FEAST*  
by  
R. Charles Grant, D.Min.  
**Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church**  
Bryn Mawr, PA

Readings: Psalm 95:1-7  
I Corinthians 11:23-29  
Colossians 3:15-17

July 24, 2011 – Holy Communion

**Psalm 95:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> O come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
<sup>2</sup> Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise!  
<sup>3</sup> For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.  
<sup>4</sup> In God's hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are God's also.  
<sup>5</sup> The sea is his, for God made it,  
and the dry land, which God's hands have formed.  
<sup>6</sup> O come, let us worship and bow down,  
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker!  
For the Lord is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.

**I Corinthians 11:23-29**

<sup>23</sup>For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, <sup>24</sup>and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup>In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup>For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. <sup>27</sup>Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. <sup>28</sup>Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup>For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

## **Colossians 3:15-17**

<sup>5</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup>And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

When I first came to serve as one of your associate pastors just over a year ago, I formed some initial impressions of you – even as you formed impressions of me. I noticed a lot of things about BMPC – our rich heritage and traditions, the vibrancy and energy of our mission, the depth of the Christian education, and of course our weekly worship. This is where Bryn Mawr Presbyterian really shines. This majestic space. The music. The dignity and order and depth of our worship. Especially at Holy Communion.

I have been in the ministry now for well over 30 years. I have presided over the Lord's Table hundreds of times. But initially – and if I am truly honest with you – even still, presiding at this Lord's Table can be intimidating. For a new pastor, it is more than learning how to fit into established patterns. There is an air of formality and solemnity here during Holy Communion.

Of course, our Presbyterian heritage encourages this attitude. We Presbyterians have a religion of the head more than the heart; we value order over ardor. The Scottish and Presbyterian poet and novelist Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote in his

diary (after attending his local Presbyterian Church), "I attended church today – but I am not depressed!" Another 18<sup>th</sup> century writer, Charles Dickens, rendered a similar judgment after attending a meeting of pastors and church leaders. Dickens said the meeting was so dead, so dull and so boring that after a couple hours (now I KNOW he was with Presbyterians), Dickens offered: "May I make a suggestion? Let's move over to a table, join hands and sit in silence and see if we can commune with the living."

No where is our legacy of the deadly seriousness of faith more pronounced than at the table of Holy Communion. The sources of this legacy are two: a poor theology of Holy Communion and a misreading of Paul's injunction in our text from I Corinthians to not partake of Holy Communion unworthily.

The protestant reformers read Paul as saying, "Communion is serious business. Make sure your heart and soul are ready to share in this blessed sacrament of the church. *Or else.*" Even so, the first generation of reformers held to weekly communion. Subsequent generations came to hold communion as such serious business they believed it should not be done very often – lest one commune unworthily. Along the way, the joyous feast became a solemn and at times terrifying assembly.

If I should be so bold, I propose the later reformers, and then the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century who followed Luther and Calvin, misread Paul by failing to grasp the Corinthian context. Paul was not against exuberant celebration in worship! This is the man who wrote – *from prison* - "**Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say rejoice!**" The problem with communion in Corinth was not that of it being too joyous a

celebration – or even that unworthy sinners were receiving communion. In Paul’s eyes, apart from God’s gracious mercy we are ALL unworthy sinners who apart from Christ, will never be worthy.

The problem in Corinth was the pattern of the Corinthians relegating the celebration of the sacrament to footnote status, rather than giving it a central place of honor in worship. And the greater scandal was the Corinthians’ propensity for separating into cliques and factions. The Corinthians were judging one another, harming one another – and in the process, the unity and purity of the church as the body of Christ was threatened.

Our Pauline inheritance, then, is not so much “Watch out when you receive communion! No smiling allowed!” The better part of Paul, the main message of Paul is to “Rejoice in the Lord always!”

When it comes to our theology of Holy Communion, we need to remember that the Lord’s Table is not the table of death but the banquet table of the resurrection. We celebrate the *Lord’s Supper*, not the *Last* supper. For sure, at the table we remember the death as well as the resurrection of our Lord. We remember and give thanks for the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf.

But we gather around the Lord’s Table not because of Good Friday, but because of Easter morning. We are here not so much because Jesus DIED, but because through the power of God Jesus LIVES, and through the living Christ, SO ALSO WE LIVE.

The liturgy of the Lord's Supper draws us into the upper room where Jesus celebrated that last Passover meal with his disciples, one of whom betrayed him, another of whom denied him, and the rest of whom simply ran away. In a sense every time we rehearse the words of institution we re-enter that upper room of the Last Supper. *But we do not tarry there.* For the Lord is not in the upper room, even as he is not in the empty tomb. He lives! And by the grace of God so also shall we.

The joyous feast of Holy Communion is a source of RENEWAL. The nursery rhyme says "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." So also our celebration of the goodness and greatness of God is the motivation for our service and the heart of our shared life as a congregation. We NEED the renewal of body and spirit that comes as we gather around the table of our Lord in Holy Communion.

We also NEED to celebrate the joyous feast of the gospel if we are to be true to the good news of Jesus Christ. The news about Jesus Christ is GOOD news after all, and what does any person do when he receives good news? As pastor Henry Mitchell has said, "Public jubilation should not be reserved for touchdowns and home runs. Authentic gospel feasting begets its own irresistible celebration, [and] to hold or inhibit it is to lose the joy itself, along with the whole message."(LP 5:4:32)

Today, I invite you to push the envelope a little bit in the direction of rejoicing in the Lord always. When you receive and pass the communion trays, flash a smile!

One of the unending tensions of church life is the conflict between doing good works and having a good time. There is no question that the life of faith is about both. For sure, we are called to lives of discipleship, to take up the cross and follow Jesus. And just as for sure, we are invited to God's joyous feast. The tension between celebration and service can never be an "either-or" proposition: As rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Torah without a tune is devoid of spirit." (LP *ibid.*) The deepest form of discipleship is living and sharing with all of God's children the joy of a life with God. Living and extending the good news of God every day to every one. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *The cost of discipleship*, "...the Christian life is not one of gloom, but of *ever increasing joy in the Lord.*"

The author of Colossians united celebration and service this way: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

The Lord's Table is a celebration of resurrection. The Lord's Table is the source of renewal for faith and life. And the joyous feast of the Lord's Table is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. For when we gather around the table in openness to God and in fellowship with brothers and sisters in the Lord, we ENACT the kingdom of God. And that's something to celebrate!

As Christians we seek to pattern our lives by the model given us in Jesus Christ. And what did Jesus do? Jesus enjoyed table fellowship with sinners, and *THROUGH THAT FELLOWSHIP, sinners entered a new relationship with God and neighbor.* Through table fellowship with Jesus men and women found new life for themselves and new life with God and their neighbors.

And so also, when we gather around our Lord's Table, we find new life with God and neighbor. We glimpse what human fulfillment and divine destiny are all about. Here, at this table, we who are broken are made whole. Here at this table the sting of death and despair meets the power of resurrection hope. Here we who are lonely, find a friend. Here we who yearn for meaning and peace in life meet the one who is the way, the truth and the life. Here, we take our places at God's banquet table. Here we find renewal for our daily lives of service and praise. Here we taste of the abundance of life. Here we unite in thanksgiving and gratitude to the good and great God from whom all blessings flow. [AMEN]

Friends: This is the joyful feast of the people of God!  
They will come from east and west, from north and south,  
And sit in at table in the kingdom of God.

This is the Lord's Table.  
Our Savior invites all of those who trust him  
To share the joyous feast he has prepared. AMEN.