

Transformation through Celebration

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Ancient Witness: Isaiah 25:6-8

A young Rabbi said to the master, “You know, when I join others in study and great feasts, I feel a great sense of light and life. But the minute it’s over, it’s all gone; everything dies in me.” The old Rabbi said, “It is just this feeling that happens when a person walks through the woods at night when the breeze is cool and the scent in the air is delicious. If another joins the traveler with a lantern, they can walk safely and joyfully together. But if they come to a crossroads and the one with the lantern departs, then the first must grope her way alone *unless she carries the light within her.*” (*Tales of the Hasidim*) You could say that this is what the life of faith means—to carry that light within oneself.

There’s something about being in the company of others, feasting, eating, that can fill us with a joy and light. There is something about a celebration that transforms us and gives us life. There’s something about community—other people—that is necessary for living a life of faith.

In the Jewish tradition, the Reality of God often has been associated with a feast. The idea was that there will come a time when all people share in this banquet. There is a sense of resolution; and harmony is restored. There is shalom. As the familiar Psalm reads, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” (Psalm 23:5) It is talking about the feast of God here.

This is also what we have in our passage from Isaiah. “On this mountain the Holy One will make for all peoples a feast...” **First**, we notice that the messianic feast, prepared by the Holy One is **intended for all people**. It is all-inclusive. All people are God’s children; all are treasured and cherished by God; all people are invited.

Second, this is **an excessive meal**. “...a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” It is a meal high in cholesterol. It was a meal that had wine that had been fermenting a long, long time. This was the strong stuff, like brandy. This was a meal of excess. This was not a run-of-the-mill celebration. It was a feast that the kingdom itself had come!

There was an assumption, however, that this feast and celebrating would happen *after* the coming of the messiah and *after* the great apocalyptic battle is over and *after* good has triumphed over evil once and for all.

And this is one reason that the religious leaders were so scandalized at Jesus’ celebrations. Jesus, quite deliberately and consciously, was instituting the great feast that Isaiah and the Psalmist were talking about. And this was upsetting to the religious leaders because there was this conviction that one should not rejoice “before the time,” before the final and climatic battle with evil had been won. Jesus brought the banquet of Isaiah into the homes of these hated

people like Simon the Pharisee and Zacchaeus the tax collector. Instead of destroying the enemy, he invited them to dinner!

Jesus' way caused others to say about him, "Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Matthew 11:19) Jesus was sharing in a *feast*, a meal of abundance and excess, where cups overflowed, with all people, even our enemies.

And this was scandalous to some. Because up until now their strategy had been to *fast*, in hopes that fasting would bring about repentance, in hopes that repentance would bring about the destruction of their enemies, in hopes that the destruction of their enemies would bring about a great feast. **But the outrageous thing about Jesus' celebration was that it came before evil was destroyed.** He jumped right to the feasting and celebrating. In a way, Jesus says, the New Reality is *here*, there time is *now*, but in a way that you do not expect.

And yet, there was a method to his apparent madness. Robert Jewett said that Jesus' strategy was to

celebrate God's presence now in the messianic banquet prior to the destruction of evil, and evil will be transformed by the celebration itself. (Jesus Against the Rapture, p. 122ff)

This was what happened, for example, with Zacchaeus. Jesus' celebration with him caused a voluntary transformation on his part which physical force could not achieve. That is, feeling unconditionally accepted into the banquet, his defenses and hostilities collapsed and he began a new life of caring for the people that he had formerly exploited. The strategy was *transformation through celebration*. This was Jesus' method with everyone—come join our love feast!

Jesus also transformed the Passover, the rite of nationalistic escape, into a feast of enemies. Passover was originally an event of exclusion. The lamb's blood that was smeared on the door posts for the killing of the first born in Egypt, for the destruction of enemies, was transformed into the cup, the symbol of hospitality and sharing. The unleavened bread, baked for the hurried escape of the elect, was transformed into nourishment for all. Jesus transformed the Passover of exclusion into the celebration of inclusion. Everyone is valued, everyone is equal in the kingdom feast where competition and status seeking will not be allowed. Arguing who is the greatest will not be tolerated. God is not partial to any one person or any one country. God loves all. The celebration is open to all. Come, and be transformed.

In many ways the Last Supper was a "feast of enemies," where the tensions and differences between the disciples were overcome. There were not "birds of a feather." A more varied, motley group could hardly have been imagined. The Twelve were a diverse group and never would have joined together under ordinary circumstances.

Matthew (Levi) was a tax collector and a collaborator with the Roman authorities. Peter, James, John and Andrew were fishermen, lower-class people who lived off the land.

Judas Iscariot and Simon were from the Zealot resistance movement in the fight for Jewish independence.

Philip was from a Greek background. (Greek surname)

And Bartholomew (Nathanael) was the upstanding middle-class figure.

Robert Jewett said that Jesus deliberately chose this diverse group. He wrote,

Jesus wanted the messianic feast to be truly inclusive, linking mortal enemies around a single table as an emblem of the reconciliation that marks the kingdom of God.

And with the disciples, in the celebration, there was a transformation. In the eating together day after day, the barriers between them were broken down. And once this happened, they did not stop there, but the feast was carried to include other enemies, with so-called sinners and outcasts, with Pharisees, and with wealthy representatives of the political establishment. And that feast which joined a circle of enemies together and transformed them, spread to the peasant villages in Galilee.

Judas never really did understand this. He was still operating under the old mode of thinking and trying to force the violent coming of the messiah. By turning Jesus over, he was trying to initiate the final battle and the destruction of the enemies with legions of angels.

But Jesus tried to warn him not to do this. He tried to tell him that violence and destruction were not the way of God. He tried to tell him about love and reconciliation.

Perhaps life in a church should be a “feast of enemies,” where tensions and differences are overcome by celebration. Perhaps *how* we do things is at least as important as *what* we do as a church. I’m not talking about a false reconciliation where we politely co-exist, where hostility is merely veiled in passive aggression. I’m not talking about a pseudo-community where differences are suppressed. I’m talking about a community where real differences are expressed and people are nevertheless respected, celebrated and unconditionally accepted.

It was the great German mystic, Meister Eckhart, who wrote about living life without a “why”:

Perform all of you deeds without whys and wherefores...

Life is lived for its own sake and emanates from its own sources; hence it is lived entirely without whys or wherefores.

What he was talking about is living and enjoying life as a celebration. It is to be and experienced without measuring success, without calculating benefit, without purpose, without expectation, without cause and effect.

When we live and love without a why, we do not expect anything in return. We simply experience ourselves as part of the good creation, part of the whole, part of a single entity. And this is how God operates, said Eckhart:

God, too, loves us without a why or wherefore... But love has no why, no reason.

To live and to love unconditionally is the true nature of celebration. Love, like a flower, has no why. It simply blooms because it blooms. We, too, are called to love and bloom, to live and celebrate, to embrace and accept the creation, to sense our unity and oneness.

Celebration leads to knowing we are one, that we are members of each other, that there's a mystical connection of all living things. It leads to redemption and reunion. It means to experience life itself as a sacrament.

The Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, had a great example about this. He said,

There are two ways to wash the dishes: the first is to wash dishes in order to have clean dishes; the second is to wash dishes in order to wash dishes.

And what he was talking about is that the first way consists of getting the task over and done with. We are thinking about the future, not fully appreciating the present moment, not really attentive to life. The second way, however, it to live without a why. It is to take life in—to celebrate. It is to experience life as a sacrament. As he would say,

The miracle is not to walk on water but on the earth.

The path of celebration leads to this kind of awareness. It leads to reconciliation, to appreciation, to unconditional acceptance. This is the path of life and love. This is the path of transformation. This is the path of Jesus. It leads us to the undeniable conclusion, in the words of the poet Rilke: "Just being here is magnificent."

Finally, to some it may seem premature.

Living life in celebration,
without a why,
as a sacrament,

is, in a sense, to live and act "as if,"
as if God's reign of peace and wholeness is already here.

Because you know, it is.

It is!