

The Spiritual Practice of Feasting

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-11

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

Can you recall the last time you went to a really good outdoor barbeque with friends? Maybe it was the 4th of July or even just a fun weekend gathering? Do you remember the way your friends' eyes lit up when they saw you arrive? Can you recall the way the meat smelled sizzling on the grill, the laughter and camaraderie of unhurried companionship around a shared meal, and the overfull feeling you left with after not being able to turn down an extra serving of your friend's famous cobbler? Feasting and fellowship are one of life's greatest blessings, they are built into us, and they have also been integral to our religious practice from the earliest days.

Most Christians are familiar with the idea that Holy Communion, through the breaking and eating of the bread, is a sacramental feast. It is a liturgical expression of a shared meal, an outward expression, in a small way, of a spiritual feast of infinite proportions. But what many of us do not realize, is that this Eucharist finds its origin in the ancient liturgical practice of a shared barbeque.

When modern Christians think about the Old Testament sacrificial system, we imagine the temple, the priests, and even animals, but from there it gets a little fuzzy. We know the animals had to die, but we tend to imagine them being burned whole while penitents slink away, leaving the priests to their work. But the truth is a little more complex than that, much more enjoyable, and such good news for us!

In today's reading from Exodus, we see God in a fury because the Israelites had made sacrifices to a golden calf. It's easy to imagine God upset about idolatry, after all the people were breaking the first and most important commandment. But, if we don't understand what is going on with the sacrifices, then we can be misled regarding God's fury over their misuse. It can be especially mystifying to hear Jesus' words about the good

shepherd, who tenderly goes after the wayward, after hearing God declare wrath against sinners.

At the heart of our faith is the understanding that sin separates us from God, that it was because of sin that death entered the world. It is Jesus' resurrection from the dead that makes it possible for us to overcome the power of death, so that we might live reconciled to God. But, tucked in there, between Adam's first sin and Jesus' resurrection, was God's gift to mankind of a sacrificial system that made it possible for generations of people, who lived before Jesus, to experience reconciliation with God.

The Israelites had five different types of sacrifices. We typically think of only one; the whole burnt offering. It makes sense because this is the one Jesus ultimately satisfies. In the Old Testament the whole burnt offering was the sacrifice that was meant to be perpetually burning on the altar. An animal would be killed twice a day so the offering was continually burning and the whole thing would be consumed. It was meant to illustrate complete consecration to God; it mediated between God, who could not be in the presence of sin, and the people. It provided Israel's atonement. Occasionally individuals would bring this type of sacrifice, but it was typically just made on behalf of the whole nation. As long as that smoke was rising, the people's hearts were free to celebrate in God's presence. Rather than being somber, this sacrifice was typically prescribed to be accompanied with joyful music.

Beside the whole burnt offering, the other four types of sacrifices were offerings for peace, sin, guilt, and grain offerings for thanksgivings or dedications. Each of these four offerings were partly consumed in the flames, while the rest was either roasted for the priests to enjoy or shared among the ones who brought the sacrifice. These four types of offerings were made while the whole burnt offering remained on the fire, making it possible for the people to approach God, to re-enter into a relationship of fellowship, worship, and joy with

God. - And because the divine appreciates a good cookout, the smell of the steak and bread on the grill was said to provide a pleasing aroma to God.

Between the smell of barbequing meant, the gathering of friends, and the eating, Old Testament temple worship would have felt an awful lot like a festive barbeque. To properly understand the sacrificial system, we need to think of it like liturgical feasting.

Two thousand years after Jesus' sacrifice alleviated the need for these liturgical barbeques, we continue to express our celebration at the altar rail. We approach with confidence, like the ancient Israelites came to the temple, knowing their atonement had been made because they saw the smoke of the whole burnt offerings rising to heaven. And it is with that confidence, because we are welcomed to the table by Christ, that we continue to bring the offerings of our own heart. Like David recounts in Psalm 51, we know the evil we have done, the ways we have transgressed against God and others. Like Paul, we know our propensity to violence and unbelief. We come to the altar rail with both our penitence over our failures and our thanksgiving for God's gracious gifts. We offer our sacrifices of honest repentance and then we feast.

In our text from Exodus, God was angry at the Israelites because of their sacrifice to the golden calf. God had just gone to a LOT of trouble to rescue them from Pharoah. After 400 years of separation, God made it so they could share in fellowship with the divine, so they could know, experience and live for and with God in an ongoing relationship. The sacrificial system was a prescribed way to prioritize the development of that relationship. God was inviting them to a regular banquet. It was an invitation into intimacy; to communicate the joys, failures, and offenses they had experienced, talk about them with God, express delight or forgiveness, and then eat a good meal together with their host, Gods own self. In today reading, the Israelites grew impatient for Moses to return off the mountain. They gave up on their relationship with God and instead shared that intimacy with a piece of metal. God, their rescuer, had been cast-off, betrayed rejected. If God

hadn't been enraged, it would indicate that the relationship didn't really matter. In this instance, we need to see God's pain to understand God's love.

Which is why, as true as it is to compare the sacrificial system to a liturgical cookout, it is equally true that it was not simply or only joyful. The people who brought the sacrifices, who trusted God's love and watched the whole burnt offerings simmer, were also the ones who held the animals still while the priests slaughtered them. We get our steaks wrapped in cellophane on trays in the grocery store. The Israelites did not eat a lot of meat. These barbeques were a tasty extravagance. But the people recognized that meal and their very lives were bought by another's death. So, to honor death, they feasted with joy.

Have you noticed how many stories of Jesus center around food? It isn't accidental! Jesus' life was sacramental. He was forever offering food, creating food, breaking bread, and welcoming the wrong people to the table to eat with him. Jesus was trying to teach us how to find true sustenance in this life. We need to eat to live. We need to eat with Jesus to have a relationship with God. And we need to feed on Jesus to be strengthened to live as Christ in this world. Bottom line- We need to be feasting people.

The story in Exodus illustrates the importance of faithfulness in our relationship with God. In Luke we see Jesus who is the human image of God. Both God the Father and Jesus the Son eat with sinners. Jesus, however, teaches us that the heart of God is to pursue the wayward. When the Israelites were first getting to know God in the wilderness, God's passion for them was shown in fierce anger against their unfaithfulness. When Jesus was showing people what God looks like in flesh, he taught them about Heaven's joy when sinners return to relationship with God. Every time we come to this table, we have an opportunity to remember God's fierce delight in our fellowship. And even when we're grilling outside with friends, we can recall God's desire to be at the center of the feast.

May we be a people so convinced of God's love for us that we come eagerly to the altar, with our sacrifices in hand, admitting our failures and sharing our joys. And as we feast,

may our bodies be so invigorated by the life of Jesus in the bread that our joy goes with us back out into the world.