

4 December 2022

Anatomy of a Festival: Feasting Deuteronomy 16:13-15

As we think this Advent about why and how to celebrate our Christian festivals, we are looking at some of the festival instructions that are found in the Mosaic Law. Last week we read about preparing for the Passover. This week, we read about the Festival of Booths, from Deuteronomy 16, verses 13-15:

¹³You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing-floor and your wine press. ¹⁴Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. ¹⁵For seven days you shall keep the festival to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate.

The book of Deuteronomy commands all the Israelites, if at all possible, to attend three festivals each year in Jerusalem: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which concludes with the Passover; the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks later, sometimes called Pentecost; and the Feast of Booths. This last celebration commemorates the years when the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, living in temporary structures, depending on God for their basic needs. But the Feast of Booths had a second purpose as well. It was held just at the time of the Fall harvest, and so it is as much a Harvest Festival as it is a religious observance. Well, look at what the people are told to do: basically have a massive week-long feast, enjoying the fruit of the field and the fruit of the vine. All the people in the local community are to join in: sons and daughters, free and slave. They were to invite Levites (the clergy), foreigners who happened to be living among them, and especially the widows and orphans and anyone else who might not have enough. Our passage ends with a stern commandment: “The Lord your God will bless you . . . so you shall surely celebrate!”

Why is that every big holiday seems to involve a feast? It does, doesn't it? In our lives, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter all have their traditional big meals. Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day are cookouts. Every festival comes with a feast. In fact, the word “festival” itself is derived from the word “feast.” (So, technically, “festive clothing” is clothing with gravy stains. I have lots of festive clothes.) But back to the question: why does a special day always seem to involve a table loaded with food? There's an obvious answer, of course: we *like* to eat. What else are we going to do on a day off?

But a feast is more than just food. Look again at the directions in Deuteronomy for the Feast of Booths. They aren't so much about what is *on* the table as about *who* is there. Bring your sons *and* your daughters. Include your slaves; they eat with everyone else. Invite the Levites. Then bring in strangers, especially people who might not have enough to eat: foreigners, widows, orphans. This feast is not just a time of eating your fill; it's a time of eating your fill *together* and making sure everyone has enough.

And it's also a time of breaking down barriers. There is no difference between males and females at the table; all have a place. There are no social distinctions there; servants and the poor are seated alongside prosperous landowners. And no one is excluded because of their ethnicity or

nation; foreigners are welcome. I think there's just something universally human about the experience of eating; our shared need for and pleasure in food transcends all boundaries and levels all hierarchies. All of us need to eat. None of us are particularly attractive to watch or listen to while we do it. What Paul says in Galatians – “In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” – is most obviously true at the table.

This universality, in turn, may be why meals are so often regarded as sacred. When you have eaten with someone, you have shared your humanity with that person and created a bond. In cultures around the world, a shared meal is the equivalent of a promise of friendship. In traditional societies, treaties are nearly always celebrated with shared food, and in the Hebrew Bible covenants are ratified with a covenant meal. And to break that covenant is nothing less than betrayal. The psalmist of Psalm 41, a psalm of lament, cries out “Even my close friend has betrayed me! / One who has eaten of my bread!” So a feast is not just an occasion for chowing down or even just a time of fellowship; it is an expression of covenant faithfulness to others. Hebrew has a specific word for “covenant faithfulness,” but it's most often translated simply as, “Love.” Sharing food is a language of love.

Now we must admit that not every tradition treats a feast as sacred. In some cultures and religions, the shared physical humanity of food is not an expression of love but a weakness to overcome; it's a mark of our dependence on the evil and transitory physical world. We find this attitude toward matter in several of the Greek philosophies, including Plato, in ancient Gnosticism, and in some expressions of Hinduism and Buddhism, where the goal for humanity is to overcome our material selves by denying our flesh, conquering our physical desires for material things, and turning our focus to our spirits instead. From that perspective, a feast is a temptation to evil, a giving in to our lower selves.

But this is not our faith's perspective, and it is not the teaching of our scriptures. Our Bible begins with the clear statement that the physical world is good. God, the artist, created it intentionally, joyfully, then looked at it and said, “I like that!” Nor is there anything low or defiling about material things. The psalms proclaim thanks to God for the gifts of food and drink – not just because they are necessities for life but because they are *good*; they make us happy. The Bible does call occasionally for fasting – usually in times of repentance and mourning – but these cases are few and temporary. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, food is good, and feasting is a way to give thanks to God. Jesus himself affirms this. When he is asked, “How come your disciples don't fast, like John's disciples and the Pharisees?” he replies, “You don't fast at the wedding party, do you? Well, there will be times to fast, but right now the bridegroom is here. We celebrate!” It is worth nothing that in his teaching, Jesus' most frequent metaphor for the Kingdom of God is “a banquet.”

That's why we feast on our special days. Because food is a gift of God, because food is a great leveler that breaks down barriers and brings people from every class and nation and gender together in shared humanity, and because sharing that human experience with others reminds us that we are in covenant with them, under God, called to share with them that covenant faithfulness that is love.

And so it came about that on Jesus' last night with his disciples before his death, he sat down with them for a feast. He broke bread with them, passed a cup around, looked sadly at his friend Judas – one who had eaten his bread and shared his table and yet was about to betray him – and then said, “I want you to keep doing this. Keep gathering at the table. Keep breaking

covenant bread with each other. Keeping sharing the covenant wine. But this time let that bread be the covenant of my physical body that I am giving to you, and let that wine be a new covenant in my blood. Do you understand? No, I don't suppose you do. Well, do it anyway and keep doing it until you start to understand." We've been doing it together ever since, whether we understand it or not. One thing we do understand, though, is that Christ's table is not a private party. It is for everyone who would like to taste his food and his covenant love.

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 right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing,
always and everywhere to give thanks to you,
Almighty God, creator of Heaven and Earth.
You created the world and declared it good,
You created humans, and declared us good as well,
You planted a garden and bid us enjoy it.
And even though we aren't good at simple enjoyment,
You still shower us with your blessings.
And so, with your people on earth
and all the company of heaven
we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.
Who did not hesitate to become a part of your own creation,
Who ate and drank and loved and laughed.
Who shared bread and wine and conversation around the table,
With rich men and refugees, prostitutes and priests.

And today we remember that communion of food and friendship, how, on the night in which he gave himself up for us he took bread,
gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
When you eat it, remember this meal with me."

When the supper was over, he took a cup of wine,
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:

“Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
As often as you drink it, remember drinking it with me.”

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ’s offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and this fellowship of bread and wine.
Make this meal be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit, make us one with Christ,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory,
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,
all sitting around the table with you, Almighty God,
now and forever. **Amen.**

Final word: Our sacramental feast isn’t much of a “feast,” when all’s said. It’s more a hint of a feast – and a gluten-free hint at that. In some ways, the church potluck, or even the coffee fellowship time is closer to the original sacrament than our ceremonial one is. But the love that is shared at this altar is not just a taste; it’s the real thing. As you leave, take that with you. To the buffet line in the Fellowship Hall. But first we sing again.