

**PARTY ON!**

A little over a week ago the Times ran a feature story with the intriguing headline “Cake, but No Presents, Please.” The story went on to recount how some parents today are throwing their children an alternative type of birthday party. “In part to teach philanthropy and altruism, and in part as a defense against swarms of random plastic objects destined to clutter every square foot of their living space,” writes the reporter, “a number of families are experimenting with gift-free birthday parties, suggesting that guests donate money or specified items to the charity of the child’s choice instead.” (New York Times, July 27, 2007, B1)

The story told of one child raising funds for the local fire department, and another who solicited donations for Heifer Project. Still others collected dress-up clothes for kids with cancer, and toys for Toys for Tots. One mother who hosted such a party, said, “We’re trying to raise [our son] in a way of not being too much of a consumer. . . . He definitely has enough things.” (Ibid, B-7)

Still, old habits die hard. One Dad whose child was a guest at the party raising money for the fire department confessed to being concerned that he’d misunderstood. He brought the requested financial donation for the fire fighters, but, just in case, he had a model airplane wrapped in birthday paper in the back seat of his car.

I guess one might call such affairs “parties with a purpose.” I’ve known of children in our congregation who’ve done something similar. It’s a noble idea—and one that runs quite contrary to the rich man’s idea of a party in our reading from Luke.

Luke tells us that a man approached Jesus hoping he’d resolve a family squabble about an inheritance. But Jesus refuses to get in the middle of it. Instead he tells a story which he hopes will help the man recognize that material possessions aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.

A rich farmer has a good year. Bumper crops. Wheat and barley in abundance. Subprime mortgages are selling like hot cakes. So he decides to build bigger barns, that way he can sock away his grain and just sit back.

“And I will say to my soul, “says the rich man, “Soul, you have ample good laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

The rich man was sure he’d finally gotten enough. The rich man thought his bigger barns and their contents would provide him with security.

But then the story takes a turn—an unexpected guest shows up at the party—God speaks up.

**“You fool! This very night your very life will be demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”**

In the words of playwright Moss Hart—**““You can’t take it with you.” Or as some wag once noted, “There are no pockets in burial shrouds.”**

The children and parents in the Times article are having parties that celebrate the honored guest, and help others at the same time. They are not parties marked by conspicuous consumption, but rather by conspicuous concern. The rich farmer, on the other hand, is caught up in what one scholar calls **“the hollowness of hedonism.”** (R. Alan Culpepper, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, IX: 257)

Clearly Jesus wants to remind us that material goods, possessions, are fleeting. They can’t possibly give us lasting satisfaction. In the long run they cannot afford us real security real peace-of-mind. Only God can provide those things.

That’s the main point of the story. But sometimes, the story has been misused. Sometimes people have used it to try and prove that Jesus was opposed to parties, opposed to pleasure. Some have used it to say that being a faithful follower of Jesus means always having a solemn outlook on life. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. While I wouldn’t call him a party animal, I think the scriptures amply prove that Jesus enjoyed a good party—so long as it wasn’t merely an exercise in excessive waste. After all, in John his first miracle is turning water into wine at a wedding banquet! And over and over again we read about his attendance at dinner parties, about his breaking bread and pouring wine for his friends.

In fact, many scholars feel the central theme of Jesus’ ministry can be found in these celebrative meals. Over and over again Jesus invited his followers to seek first the Kingdom of God, the reign of God, the rule of God. A kingdom that was open to all, and built on love. No one was excluded from the kingdom of God, said Jesus. And he demonstrated that in the welcoming ways he invited all to his festive meals. Bruce Chilton, in his fascinating book *Rabbi Jesus*, writes: **“Jesus. . . made . . . communal meals . . . the ritual symbol of the coming Kingdom of God.”** (60) There’s room at the table for all—come, join the party—share the bread, share the wine!

It is for this reason that the church has made Holy Communion it’s central sacrament. Yet all too often we have treated it as something dour, something dreary. It is serious—after all, it does represent that promised heavenly banquet when all will be made right, when peace will reign and justice will prevail—but it is also celebrative. It is joyful.

J.R. Love tells of being in church one Sunday and overhearing a mother tell her four-year old son, **“No, don’t take the bread—you’re too young for communion.”** But then later, when the offering plate was being passed, she couldn’t convince him to drop in the nickel he’d brought for the collection. **“I couldn’t eat,”** he said in a loud voice, **“So I shouldn’t have to pay!”**

Fortunately, this wondrous meal is free—it is a gift of grace—just like the promised day of reconciliation and peace it represents! And that is cause to celebrate!

Sometimes the symbolic power of communion can be best seen in difficult times. Joan Maxwell is the chaplain at an acute-care hospital in Washington. She belongs to a very liturgical tradition, one that places high value on Holy Communion. In her tradition there is recognition that sometimes, for health reasons, an individual may not be able to take communion. They can't eat, or swallow, for instance. She writes: "The Church teaches that someone can receive 'spiritual communion,' whereby all the spiritual benefits of Communion are received even though nothing is actually taken by mouth. . . ." For patients who are unable to eat the consecrated communion wafer is placed on their lips as the words of hope are offered, and then it is wrapped in a cloth and later buried in the earth. (*Shalem News*, Summer 2007, 5)

Last year at Christmas time Maxwell was on duty in the ICU and had the opportunity to offer communion in just such a manner to three patients.

The linen cloth she used was a handkerchief that had been owned by her devout grandmother. She first went to the room of a woman waiting to be removed from life support. The family wanted to share communion with her one last time.

The second patient was recently readmitted, after a recurrence of her problems. She and her husband were grateful to share the celebrative meal together, even though her wafer also went into the linen handkerchief, for she could not eat.

"The third patient," writes Maxwell "was a wild-haired man who had been recently admitted from the street. He was able to speak just enough to say he wanted to receive but could not eat. He was by himself in a large room, surrounded by monitors and IV poles. After [the sacrament] he watched me closely as I placed [the wafer] in the handkerchief, raising his eyebrows when he saw the other two that were already there. 'You are not alone,' I said, and he nodded, both of us aware of the other suffering people nearby and the sustaining Presence the [wafers] represented.'" (Ibid, 6)

There are few places more difficult, more challenging, more frightening than an ICU. But even there, through Holy Communion, Christians, even those who can't eat, can celebrate the good news that we are not alone. And even those who are wild-haired and just off the streets, can find a seat at the table.

Yesterday I attended a funeral. It was a very lovely ceremony held at a local Episcopalian Church. The service included some wonderful music, a very moving homily, stirring scripture readings, and Holy Communion. Right there, in the midst of a very sad occasion, where grief was palpable as a much loved soul was being commended to God's care, right in the midst of the tears and the sorrow, we shared a holy meal. We ate bread, and drank wine, and

celebrated the good news of God's eternal love and care. I was especially struck by the words of one of the closing prayers. In part it went like this: "Almighty God, we thank you that in your great love you have fed us with [this] spiritual food and drink . . . and have given us a foretaste of your heavenly banquet. Grant that this sacrament may be to us a comfort in affliction and a pledge of our inheritance in that kingdom where there is no death, neither sorrow nor crying, but the fullness of joy . . . ." (*Book of Common Prayer*, 498)

It might be said, I suppose, that Holy Communion is the ultimate party-with-a-purpose. A party with the purpose of reminding us of that we are not alone. A party with the purpose of reminding us that at God's table there is room for one and all. A party with the purpose of proclaiming that there will come a day when death will be no more and an eternity of peace, justice and love will stretch out before us forever.

And because of that purpose, because of that hope, this very day, all around the world, Christians are gathering at tables and altars, celebrating the good news of God's love with cup and loaf. In Minneapolis, as so many lives have been shattered by a collapsing bridge, Christians gather today to share bread and wine. In New Orleans, where recovery is slow and many wonder if they will ever see progress, Christians gather to share the feast. Even in Baghdad, where lives are lost every day to violence, Christians gather to have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

Sisters and brothers, this communion meal, and every communion meal, is, in the end, a party with a purpose. It is, indeed, the joyful feast of the people of God.

Amen  
John H. Danner