

John 17: Renewal and Mission

August 18, 2024 (Aug. 13 lovefeast)

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Introduction

Julie and I had a very nice week at the beach with our daughter Madeleine who is a graduate student in Wisconsin. It's a little difficult having a child who is doing a PhD in organic chemistry who loves to talk about the details of her esoteric research, but for years I've bored her with the details of my esoteric research on the Moravians, so fair is fair. One of our favorite things at Nags Head is eating out at different restaurants almost every night. Mostly seafood, of course. The food is delicious, but the conversations over a nice meal are even better. There is just something about sharing a meal that brings people closer together. When I was chaplain at Salem College I got to eat out with a group of Buddhist monks from Tibet, and I thought it was going to be very serious and spiritual. Instead, they were laughing and joking and sharing each other's food. I noticed that some of them were eating meat, which surprised me. One of the leaders looked at me very seriously and said, "There is only one thing that we do not eat in the monastery. Seafood." That surprised me. Then he explained with a twinkle in his eyes: "Tibet is a long way from the ocean." That night I learned that a meal with laughter and joy is very spiritual.

Dining with Jesus

Food is obviously on my mind this morning. We just had a beautiful lovefeast with special music, and after church we'll have a picnic to continue our worship. It is no secret that Moravians like to eat together. Back in the 1850s an English girl attended a Moravian boarding school in Germany and wrote a book about her experience. She said, "if the Romish Church (meaning Catholic) is known for its fasts, Moravians are surely known for their feasts." Things haven't changed. I've often thought that Moravians are a lot like hobbits in Lord of the Rings. We value food and good cheer more than hoarded gold or seeking glory. But the Moravian fondness for communal

meals, whether Wednesday suppers or church picnics is not because we are gluttons; it is because we follow the example of Jesus and the disciples. If you pay close attention to the gospels, it is remarkable just how many of Jesus's teaching moments came during meals.

Of course, the most famous meal that Jesus ate with his disciples was the Last Supper, which has been the subject of much Christian art through the centuries. It's always bothered me that Leonardo DaVinci and others try to put all the disciples on the same side of the table just so we can see their faces. That distorts things somewhat. I think it's much better to picture them sitting around the table just like we do at home. Since there were so many, they may have had to sit at a couple of tables. The meal was during Passover and so there would have been a lot of food. It may not have been exactly the same food Jews eat at the modern Seder, but would have been similar. There was lamb, bread, herbs, wine and olive oil. Some of the meal would include religious rituals, but some of it would have folks just talking and maybe laughing.

In three of the gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus uses the Passover meal to institute the most sacred Christian ritual, which we call Holy Communion or the Eucharist. Last week you had Holy Communion and during the service pastor Ginny quoted Jesus when she blessed the bread and grape juice.

John's gospel is different from the others. Jesus does eat a last meal with his disciples, but he doesn't give them the bread and wine saying that it is his body and blood. Instead, he teaches them some of the most important lessons in the Bible. The Last Supper in John four chapters long, almost a quarter of the gospel! Our passage for this morning comes from the end of this long farewell discourse, and I think it is very appropriate we heard these words just after we had our lovefeast meal.

Last will and testimony

Count Zinzendorf always called John 17 Jesus's Last Will and Testament since it was his final teaching before his arrest, trial, and execution. He was taking

the opportunity to tell his followers what was most important for them to remember after he was gone. It is also known as Jesus's High Priestly Prayer since the whole chapter is one long prayer by Jesus to God the Father to protect and strengthen them. Those of you who are fans of Harry Potter may know that the protective spell used to ward off dementors is called the Patronus, which is Latin for "Father." Jesus is asking God to be the Patronus who protects his followers from despair and anxiety.

In verse 13 Jesus prays that the disciples "may have my joy made complete in themselves." Isn't it interesting that in his very last prayer with his closest disciples, the prayer that he offers when he is facing arrest and trial, the prayer that he offers after Judas has left to betray him, Jesus wants his disciples to experience joy. Not just joy – heavenly joy. The joy that he has experienced with the Father in heaven and which he brought into the world.

Joy is different from pleasure or fun or even happiness, which depend so much on the changing fortunes of life. Joy is a state of mind, a way of being. Joyful people can look at the world around them, even with its crime and slime and grime, and still see the beauty that shines through everything that God has made. Spiritual joy is a gift of God that is hard to describe but wonderful to experience. Many saints exhibited this joy, even in the face of persecution. Our Moravian ancestors experienced this joy even as storms assailed their ship or as they buried people they loved.

To be in the world, not of the world

Notice that Jesus did not pray that God would take his followers out of the world. Quite the opposite. He sent them into the world. But he said that his followers do not "belong" to the world. We are to be in the world but not "of the world," which sounds like a paradox. John's gospel often uses the word "kosmos" or "world" to refer to the disordered and corrupt world of human society. The world here is the world that is dominated by human selfishness and greed, human violence and oppression, mindless human destruction and domination. Jesus prays that his followers will not be overcome or corrupted by that world of cruelty and misery. He wants them to experience the joy of

eternal life and to take that joy out into the world. The disciples of Christ are to be little lights in the darkness around them, and the church is to be a community of service rather than conquest.

August 13, 1727

So what does all of this have to do with our festival in commemoration of August 13, 1727? Moravians have heard the story many years after year, and I won't repeat the whole story again this morning. But for the sake of our visitors from the Academy I'll tell some of the story. In 1722 a group of refugees from Moravia were granted asylum on the estate of Count Zinzendorf in Germany, and he allowed them to build a village called Herrnhut. It was to be a religious village, but as the village grew there was conflict. People disagreed over theology and biblical interpretation and ethics and worship and music and rituals and who should keep the streets clean and how to raise children and you get the picture. A polarizing figure named Kruger came through Herrnhut and got people all worked up over predictions of the apocalypse and convinced some of them that Zinzendorf was the antichrist. There was a lot of anger, fear, and distrust, not unlike what we are experiencing in the United States today as people violently disagree over politics and other matters.

In the spring of 1727 Zinzendorf drew up a list of rules and regulations to bring order to Herrnhut. He taught people how to resolve conflicts peacefully and how to disagree in love. They learned that most of their disagreements were about relatively unimportant doctrines. What was most important was to follow Jesus's commandment to love one another: not to convince one another, not to overpower one another, but to love one another. To listen to each other and pray for each other. They signed this Brotherly Agreement on May 26, 1727 and spent the summer living into this new perspective.

And they found that they could love each other, and the more they loved, the more joy they felt. Then on August 13 during a communion service they had an overpowering experience of the Holy Spirit and the remnants of their former animosity were burned away. Today we view this as the birthday of the Renewed Moravian Church. August 13 was the beginning, not the end. Four

days later there was a powerful revival among the children of Herrnhut who also felt the presence of God. One of the most distinctive things about the Moravians was that they believed that children have a spiritual life and can teach the grown ups some things about loving God. Everything the Moravians did, including the founding of Home Church and Salem Academy & College was a result of that August 13 experience.

Almost exactly five years after the August 13 renewal experience, the first missionaries left Herrnhut on a treacherous journey that brought them to St Thomas. They were sent into the world and tried not to be overcome by the world. Renewal and mission have always been connected in the Moravian Church. Zinzendorf believed that Jesus's great prayer in John 17 was being answered in Herrnhut as the people put aside their selfishness and embraced one another in love. They were filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and went into the world as agents of divine mercy.

And wherever they went, they shared in the love feast. Wherever they went, they shared their food with each other and sang praises to God. May we enjoy our meals and music and laughter today. May we learn to live together in love despite disagreements. And may we feel the blessing and encouragement of the Holy Spirit as we are sent out into the world as agents of divine love.