**Joy at the Dinner Table**

**Text: Isaiah 55:1;12**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**World Communion Sunday**

**October 6, 2019**

In recent weeks I’ve been using childhood road trips as a metaphor for the journey of faith. If you’ll indulge me one more time, then I promise I’ll let it go…for a few weeks, anyway!

When I was a kid, we sang in the car. And we played games. And we ate snacks. I remember one trip when I was maybe 4 years old and my brother and sister and I each got our own little box of Animal Crackers. This was a big deal. I mean, we’re not talking about the occasional lifesaver or half-stick of gum – not even a whole stick, but a half-stick, because my parents carefully rationed our snacks – but on *this* trip we each got a whole box of Animal Crackers. Thought I’d died and gone to heaven! I felt very special, and life was wonderful, and as we snacked and sang and played games that day there was a real sense of joy and excitement and community in that old Plymouth.

The French have a word for that: *esprit de corps*. Pat Bell could give us a literal translation but Merriam-Webster defines it as “the common spirit existing in the members of a group, inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group.”

*A common spirit of enthusiasm and devotion.* That’s a wonderful thing to have: in the family car; and in the church, as we journey toward the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is where we’re headed and the love and justice and peace of Christ is what we’re seeking. It helps to have food and joy and an esprit de corps along the way.

Just ask the exiles making their way back to Jerusalem. That’s the setting of today’s scripture lesson. They’re actually not on the road yet, but they’re getting ready to go, and a prophet is pointing the way. These citizens of Jerusalem have been held captive in Babylon for 50 years. Most of them were born in Babylon; only the oldest ones actually remember Jerusalem. But the grip of the oppressor who has denied them justice, the grip of the tyrant who has denied them liberty, that grip of the Babylonians is loosening, and now a prophet has arisen, and his message is this: “We’re going home.” Get ready for the long trip across the desert, get ready to enjoy the good food that God will provide in our homeland – a land that will once again flow in milk and honey – get ready, gather your supplies, and go out with joy.

The 55th chapter of Isaiah from which Grant read this morning brings to a close this good news of freedom, this good news of homecoming, this good news that God has forgiven their sin. 16 chapters of good news! We don’t know the name of the prophet who spoke these words of encouragement. We call him Second Isaiah because his words are embedded in the book of the prophet Isaiah, although he lived 200 years after the great prophet whose name is on the book. But here’s the point: his preaching instilled an esprit de corps in the travelers as they made their way back home.

They are bound together in this spirit by a God who forgives them and a God who feeds them. Let’s start with forgiveness.

These citizens of Jerusalem need forgiveness because they failed to seek justice; they failed to feed the hungry and comfort the afflicted and house the homeless. That’s why God sent them into exile. Kind of like an extended “time out.” But now, 50 years later, they’ve been forgiven, and they’re going home. In the words of the prophet, they have returned to God, and God has had mercy on them. They are walking with the Lord, who has abundantly pardoned them. And here again, in the *Old* Testament, we’re told of God’s mercy, God’s pardon, God’s grace. In other words, God’s forgiveness. Last week we heard the prophet Micah talking about grace in the 8th century B.C., this week it’s 2nd Isaiah talking about grace in the 6th century B.C. That’s B.C., as in “before Christ.” We worship a God whose heart *overflows* with grace and mercy. God has *always* been a God of grace and mercy. Many of us were taught that it’s only in the *New* Testament that we find the God of grace; that in the Old Testament we find an angry God who’s focused on the Law and the just requirements of the Law and “You’d better obey me or else!” We’re taught that this angry God has to be appeased by the sacrifice of his Son before he’ll forgive us. But folks, that’s not the way it is. Just read Micah. Just read 2nd Isaiah. Just read the Psalms. The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament. This God has *always* been merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps. 103:8). From Genesis to Malachi, throughout the Old Testament, this theme of grace and mercy is there over and over again.

God loves us. All of us. All around the world. Always has. Always will. We worship a God who forgives us. That’s the prophet’s first point.

And *because* God loves us and forgives us, God *feeds* us. That’s the prophet’s second point. God feeds us with *good* food. God feeds both body and soul. God says, “Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isa. 55:2). And the best food you don’t even have to pay for because it is the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and gentleness (see Galatians 5:22-23); the fruit of the Spirit with which God feeds our souls and pours goodness into our hearts. It’s like that box of Animal Crackers that I got as a kid. Yes, they tasted good and that’s part of the reason why I was so thrilled to get them. But also, and especially, they were a special treat that reminded me how much my parents loved me. I don’t know that I thought about that at the time, but looking back on it now I’m sure that that was part of the reason why I was so filled with joy as I held that little box. I mean, they didn’t have much money. Dad was working *and* going to school, Mom was home with these three rambunctious kids, so to give us each that treat was a real act of love and devotion on their part.

So it is when God feeds us: with love and joy and peace that is available without price; without *anyone* having to pay a price. God bids us to “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa 55:1).

As families, as a church, as the children of God, we come together around food: the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of the vine, the fruit of the field. Food for the body and the soul, provided by the One who loves us with an everlasting love and will not let us go, no matter what. We come together around food, as we journey toward the Kingdom, and there’s nothing like getting together for a meal to enhance the esprit de corps of any group.

It’s like when Helen and I were trekking in Ireland with her sister and brother-in-law, and the best part of the day – after walking for 8 or 10 or 14 miles – the best part was coming together around food: finding a good pub and delighting ourselves each night in lamb and potatoes and sausage and fish and good dark Irish beer.

God feeds us with food and drink and love and joy and peace. It enhances the esprit de corps of the Church.

Because, here’s the thing: God loves you very much. God loves all of us very much. God loves the Church – the *whole* Church, everywhere around the world. Indeed, God so loves the *world* that God sent the Son into the world, “That whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world not to be our Judge, but to be our Saviour” (John 3:16-17).

That’s something to celebrate! That’s why the whole Church, throughout the world, gathers around this Table. That’s why we go out with joy, clapping our hands and singing, all the way to the Kingdom. We have been blessed by God with love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and gentleness and liberty and justice. We have been blessed by God with *good* food. There is one bread, one body and one Spirit, just as we are called to one hope; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all (see Eph. 4:4-6). That’s good food indeed. It’s party time! Let’s sing!