

We all know that every culture has its own traditions. However there is one basic tradition that is truly *cross-cultural* - the same across the board in every culture. That tradition is tying together a feast with a celebration. Consider our lesson for today as it equates heaven with a celebration and feasting, a celebration of victory, a *celebration of the Death of Death*. Isaiah was inspired to record, ***On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meat and the finest of wines.***

Isaiah is talking about the activities in heaven here. And he talks about it in terms of a feast, a banquet – a party. He describes it as one of the richest the ancient world could imagine. The language emphasizes that it's the best. The *finest* wine was *aged* in order to increase its color and quality. The meat was the *best* that the ancient world could provide—fat and rich. This is the feast, the banquet of God's grace. Yes, the savior—God—the LORD Almighty—has prepared the best his love could offer - rich compassion and wonderful forgiveness – the most satisfying food for the soul. This is the heavenly feast.

But there is more to be said. Before we could indulge in this feast, before we could *Celebrate the Death of Death*, there was a huge helping of terrible food that had to be consumed first. This is the feast we had cooked up for ourselves. This is the feast that came from the recipe book of our own hearts. Jesus reminds us of the ingredients we use in **Mark 7:21: *Out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.***

This rotten feast Jesus ate for us. And let's make no mistake about it: it didn't taste good. Do you remember Jesus prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane? ***Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me... My Father if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.*** What was in that cup? It was the cup full of our sins. It was the eternally-

toxic cup that always results in death. And Jesus drank it for you and me. He felt its poisonous effects for you and me. And then He died for you and me.

Maybe we've never thought of Good Friday as Jesus feasting on our sins and death. But the writer to the Hebrews did. Listen to what he writes (2:9): ***Jesus... suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*** And that's exactly what Jesus did for us and all people. He ate our recipe and tasted the death it brings so that you and I wouldn't have to.

Isaiah makes the same kind of reference in the next verse of our text. Only he tells us that Jesus does more than just taste. ***On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; He will swallow up death forever.***

The words *shroud* and *sheet* here seem most naturally to be taken from the practice of wearing a veil when mourning the death of a loved one or wearing a covering when confronted by great misfortune and calamity. Death is another thing that is truly *cross-cultural*. Death is the scourge of every society and every culture. Death's icy grasp shakes every person. The individual customs vary among all the cultures of the world, but the pervasive heartache and sorrow of death...well, that's universal.

But even here Jesus has the answer to death. ***He will swallow up death forever.*** He did more than taste it. He swallowed it. He consumed it. Meaning, it is no more. Three days from Good Friday Jesus rose from the dead. And death – not temporal death, but eternal death brought about by sin – eternal death, died. For Jesus tells us, ***Because I live, you also will live.*** And the ultimate fulfillment of that promise will be in heaven. Which means the grand celebration of death's death will never end.

But you know, this heavenly feast, this celebration of death's death, doesn't just kick in on the day of our death. It's available to you now. You need to make yourselves available to it now. And you need to be eating the right stuff, right now.

And there are all kinds of tasty looking dishes out there. Satan is a master at

providing garnishes. A little relish here, a little rearranging there, a little sauce to cover it up, and he can make some very unhealthy things look very tasty for you. And if we're not careful and we're not selective and we're not discerning, we can find ourselves wolfing down all kinds of things that are not only bad for us, but will also destroy our appetite for Jesus.

Some of the competing foods might be a preoccupation with money or sex or power or self-centeredness. The world certainly makes those dishes readily available. But the truth of the matter is, they never satisfy. The equation that "more equals happier" has been proven time and time again to be a myth. As the hymnist perceptively writes: "*Many spend their lives in fretting over trifles and in getting things that have no solid ground...*"

That's why a little later on in this book God asks you to examine your diet. He asks you why you want to waste your time trying in vain to find satisfaction in something other than Jesus: ***Come***, he says, ***all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.***

Yeah...the ***richest of fare*** is the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, the Gospel that is revealed to us in the Bible. So if we're feeling a little spiritually weak, or a little sick, perhaps we need to look at our diet. We are what we eat. How are you doing with your Bible reading? How are you doing with your daily devotions? How often are you coming to communion? Are you trying to exist on a starvation diet, eating only a few days a month?

King David offers us this advice in Psalm 34: ***Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.*** And when we do, the result is spiritual health, wealth and vitality.

In a few weeks, many of us will join a celebration of gratitude for all that our heavenly Father provides. And after consuming the turkey and trimmings and

pumpkin pie, the tryptophan will kick in and your insulin will spike causing a flood of serotonin and melatonin in your brain resulting in sleepiness – you'll want to take a nap.

Yet how different is the feast described by Isaiah. This *Celebration of the death of death* results in rejuvenation, rejoicing, thanksgiving, and a desire to ***give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord.*** The work has begun already as ministry assessment has been going on through our Ministry Planning efforts. People have been getting together to talk about the Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and threats of our ministry here at New Life. The next step will be the creation of a New Life Ministry Vision for the next 3 to 5 years. But regardless of the specific Vision, the plan will look to foster broader engagement among God's people in his Word and in his service. Fostering a more active membership will strengthen our core as a congregation and better equip us to respond to the Lord's salvation with ***rejoicing*** hearts and ***glad*** service.

And it's happening already. In our recent staff meetings, we have been working on a procedures handbook, making note of how things are done for people serving now and in the future. As we compiled the list, it was amazing to me not only how much gets done on a regular basis, but how many people are giving of themselves, joyfully volunteering their time and talents to the benefit of you and me. And the truth is, most of us don't even know of their service. But that's OK. They know that God knows that they're giving back to their gracious Lord for all that he has done for them.

Yes, we are indeed blessed people. Not only have we received the gift of his salvation, we have the opportunity to be a part of his kingdom work. And thanks be to Jesus, we have even more to look forward to. On earth, we receive only a foretaste of all that will be ours through devotion to Word and Sacrament. But in heaven, we will receive the full taste of what God has prepared for His people: A feast where the food is fabulous, the spirits are high and the celebrating never ends. It just doesn't get any better than that. Amen.