

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Fellowship Offering – Celebrating Peace with God

Leviticus 7:11-17

¹¹“These are the regulations for the fellowship offering anyone may present to the LORD:

¹²“If they offer it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with oil, and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in. ¹³Along with their fellowship offering of thanksgiving they are to present an offering with thick loaves of bread made with yeast. ¹⁴They are to bring one of each kind as an offering, a contribution to the LORD; it belongs to the priest who splashes the blood of the fellowship offering against the altar.

¹⁵The meat of their fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered; they must leave none of it till morning.

¹⁶“If, however, their offering is the result of a vow or is a freewill offering, the sacrifice shall be eaten on the day they offer it, but anything left over may be eaten on the next day. ¹⁷Any meat of the sacrifice left over till the third day must be burned up.

Something I’ve repeatedly said to myself while working through this sacrifice series is, “I’m sure glad we don’t have to do that anymore.” Honestly, other than the Christ to which they pointed, there hasn’t been anything even remotely appealing about any of the offerings we’ve looked at so far. Just a lot of blood and guts.

That is until today’s sacrifice, the fellowship offering, or in Hebrew, **הַשְּׁלָמִים** *ha-shlamim*. Which comes from the word, *shalom*, which means peace, as in togetherness. Remember the purpose of last week’s sacrifice, the sin offering? It was for restoring the broken relationship between God and the sinner. Today’s offering is an expression of what it’s like when that relationship is together again and there is peace between God and his children.

That’s not to say there wasn’t any blood and guts involved. Blood was splashed against the altar and fat was burned upon it too. But there were also big thick loaves of different kinds of bread. And here’s the part that’s really cool, the priests and the people were then invited to celebrate peace with God by sitting down to enjoy a meal together of the remaining meat and bread and all the fixings! A meal, which according the last few verses of today’s First Lesson, was often an all-night feast and could sometimes last for a couple days. Sounds like a party to me!

This is borne out in the occasions recorded in the Old Testament when the *shlamim* was offered. Invariably there was a festive mood. Blessings granted by the Lord, his help experienced in fulfilling a vow or in completing some major task, or just wanting to give thanks would call for a fellowship offering. When Solomon completed the temple and then dedicated it to God’s glory and purposes 20,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats were sacrificed and eaten as fellowship offerings during a fourteen-day national celebration. During the three annual festivals on their religious calendars Israelites would come in droves to the Temple to offer them – always following the other sacrifices to restore the covenant relationship. So, the fellowship offering was an expression of how the Lord intended his relationship with his people bring them genuine happiness and true joy.

Maybe it was just me, but I had somehow developed the erroneous impression that there wasn’t a lot of laughter and smiles among the Israelites...and that’s how God wanted it, given all their sinning and complaining and violating of the terms of his covenant. Any fun and games were probably only when they were chasing after idols or because they didn’t take their sin seriously enough and so the blood and guts of their sacrificial system was meant to scare some sense into them. Our Season of Sacrifice series has shown me that this wasn’t true. Yes, Israel’s Old Testament worship involved a lot of blood and guts because of sin, but it didn’t symbolize God’s wrathful judgment as much as it did his promise to provide a substitutionary and saving sacrifice for sin in the Messiah. Faithful Israelites who saw and appreciated this gracious mercy shown them naturally loved to celebrate it as much as they could with God and with one another. And God encouraged the celebration by giving them this happy sacrifice of feasting with him and his priests and their friends and relatives.

You know that the traditional stereo-type of Christians is dour and sour, devoid of any humor and way too serious for their own good. Of course, stereo-types reveal more about the biases of the people who hold them than the people they are about. That the world will always only hear what Christians say about God’s stern judgment on sin

and ignore what we say about his gracious and free forgiveness of sins ... that it mocks the contrite penitent and praises the brazenly impenitent ... shouldn't surprise us. Jesus told us, "Everyone will hate you because of me" (Lk 21:17). But at the same time, you and I should confess how we have – maybe inadvertently - contributed to the impression that among Christians there's not a lot of laughter and smiles. That it's no fun to be among those who believe the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world.

Old Testament Israel's fellowship offering reveals what might well be missing from our practice of the faith and is thus contributing to this joyless impression. It's not the blood and the guts. The sacrificial death of Christ on the cross to redeem sinners and thereby set us at peace with God is at the heart of all our faiths. What's often lacking is what I earlier called the cool part of the *shlamim*, the fellowship, the actual taking/making time to enjoy this peace with God together as family and friends.

That's what you are, you know. Because of the blood of Christ and your confession of faith in what it has done, you are blood relatives of one another, bonded together in the family of God in ways more profound and meaningful and eternal than any other kind of relationship you have with anyone else on this planet. For example, kneeling together to eat his body and drink his blood – each having the same faith and confession of what he's done for us, of what this Sacrament really is, what it's for and what it gives us and why - is an expression of an incredibly deep relationship of peace we enjoy not only with God but also with one another. That's why we often call it "Holy Communion."

But if the only place this relationship – this fellowship - is expressed and celebrated is here at the railing for a few moments every second and fourth weekend of the month, then there's not going to be a lot of smiles and laughter. And all faith's talk about genuine happiness and true joy in Jesus is probably going to fall flat.

The real solution isn't for your pastors to crack more jokes during worship. Nor is it for you the faithful to hide the struggle and sorrow and suffering of your lives behind plastic smiles. It's simply for us to get to know one another precisely because we are true brothers and sisters at peace with God and one another. It's to simply take the time and make the time to express and celebrate our relationship. Yes, we do that at the railing. But the smiles and the laughter happen at the Lenten Suppers and the Easter Buffets and the pizza suppers and over all the coffee and donuts between services. That's what funeral luncheons and to an extent 20/30 Something gatherings and youth trips and youth groups and even some of the Bible studies are for. More than that, it's what makes going out to breakfast after church on Sunday so much better than on any other day of the week. It's why our celebrations Christmas are so much nicer after having first gathered to worship the new born king. Why the wedding reception of a Christian couple just married with God's blessing is somehow more fun to be at. When we take time ... when we make the time to express the fellowship we enjoy with God and one another, we experience some of the happiness and joy God's always intended for his family of faith.

Some of the fondest moments of my ministry have been sticking my head in one of the classrooms after catechism class is over and seeing the classmates laughing and joking around with each other while eating their Lenten supper and then going into the sanctuary together for Vespers worship. I've seen those relationships continue beyond these walls. This winter we even had some of those relationships expressed in standing up for each other in a wedding. There were lots of smiles and laughter that day.

The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, often describes the glory of eternal life in terms of sitting down together at a lavish feast with God. So vivid is this wonderful metaphor that it makes us smile as we can almost hear the laughter of heaven's great banquet hall! Ancient Israel's fellowship offering with its happy feasting with God and priests and family and friends foreshadows the celebration of peace in that place. And it teaches us something that in our busy, connected lives we can overlook to our detriment: that the genuine happiness and true joy God intends for his people is best found when we are celebrating our relationship with him together as the true sisters and brothers in the faith.

Amen.

Prayers of the Church

For Lent, p. 125

Healing and Help

- Chuck Thornton, father of Susan Perry
- James Hahm, cousin of Pastor Hahm
- James Eastman, father of Liz Harris
- Karen Fuelleman
- Judy Nickelsburg

Grieving

- Those who mourn for Jonathan Brussow, son of Brad & Carolyn Brussow

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John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷ “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.

³² And I, when I am lifted up[Ⓜ] from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

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