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Banquets are wonderful ways to rejoice in the salvation of the Lord! Time and again Jesus tells us: the kingdom of heaven will gather God's people around banquet tables to celebrate the harvest of God's Creation – the fulfillment of God's purposes. We want to be part of that banquet. It will be like a wedding banquet, Jesus tells us – we, the church, will be the Bride and he will be the Groom, and we will rejoice in a communion of love that this world can only begin to foretaste – a fullness of Life, a peace, a joy that this world cannot give, neither can this world take away.

How awesome and wonderful the joyful fellowship that awaits us!

When my father-in-law lay near death in a nursing home in central California some years ago, I went by for an extra visit, just me with him. I loved my father-in-law. He was another father to me. He was old enough to be my father's father, so he was also a grandfatherly figure. And I went to him in the semi-dark room, held his hand, told him we loved him, and prepared to pray with him, when he quietly, earnestly said: *"I can taste it."* *"Taste what?"* I asked. *"The fellowship."* And his face glowed with a light from beyond this world. *"I can taste the fellowship!"* he rejoiced! And through tears I prayed with thanksgiving that the joyful fellowship of the Kingdom of heaven was so close by.

Jesus tells us that the life beyond this world will be a feast of loving fellowship – rejoicing in our Lord. That trait marks us as God's people – *"By this will all people know you are my disciples,"* Jesus said, *"if you love one another"* (John 13:35).

This is second nature to us as Brethren. We celebrate the Love Feast as our central symbolic action, alongside baptism – the fellowship of the saints is important to us. We have been credited with being among the first to build churches with kitchens. I guess that's our contribution to church architecture – we added kitchens, for cooking the Love Feast and preparing abundant fellowship meals! Our meetinghouses also originally had the preaching table on the same level as everyone else to emphasize our being all on the same level as brothers and sisters in God's family – a fellowship of people willing to learn from each other as we follow Jesus together.

We fall short of that mutual loving respect all too often, but our aim is to begin already now on earth to share the wonderful, joyful fellowship of God's Kingdom.

So much gets in the way of that joyful fellowship – our sins of pride, selfishness, anger, meanness, hardness of heart ... so much in earthly life divides us from each other and keeps us from embracing God's love for the whole world. But we dream of the promise

given in the scriptures that God will overcome the powers of sin and death, destroying *“the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations,”* as Isaiah 25 declares, swallowing up death forever, wiping tears from all faces, removing our disgrace, so that we may *“rejoice and be glad in his salvation!”*

The Revelation of John, chapter 21, declares the same: God will dwell with us and be our God, and we will be his people most fully. *“He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.”* All things will be made new! And cowardice, unbelief, vileness, murder, sexual immorality, magic arts, idolatry, and the telling of lies will be done away with forever! Those who cling to such sins will die a second death, Revelations declares. But those who overcome sin by drinking from the spring of the water of life will be God’s children, blessed by the Lord forever. That’s what I want! How about you? **Joyful fellowship** with the Lord and with all of God’s people forever. *Joyful Fellowship!*

When we worked on the statement of purpose for our congregation, this was the phrase with which we concluded. We said: *“We are a family of Christians committed to following Jesus. We are partners in Biblical teaching, compassionate service, peace witness, and joyful fellowship.”* Joyful Fellowship! As the family of God.

The question was raised as to whether fellowship is always joyful. And indeed, our fellowship with one another is not simple, light-hearted, and carefree. We *“bear one another’s burdens”* in order to *“fulfill the law of Christ,”* as Galatians 6:2 says – in the context of confronting one another when we are caught in sin and seeking to restore one another gently. That *“law of Christ”* we are to fulfill is precisely the command of Jesus that we must love one another. *“A new command I give to you,”* John 13:34 records: *“love one another.”* It is the love that we rejoice in, not the muck and mire we have to go through in order to faithfully love and care for each other.

All Saints Day is a good time to make this affirmation. We have just gone through All Hallow’s Evening (Hallowe’en), when we try to poke fun at all the powers of evil that haunt and torment God’s creation. The only reason we can poke fun is because we *know* that God’s power to give Life is stronger than all the powers of sin and evil that seek to destroy and bring death. We celebrate God’s Victory! As we read from Romans 8 today, we affirm our faith – *“We are more than conquerors through him who loves us! ... Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither things above nor things below, nor anything else in any part of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord!”* Amen? Amen!

Do **you** believe it? Do you *trust* the Lord Jesus to bring you safely through the cross to the banquet tables of Life with God?

Who helped you learn to believe?

Someone must have believed with such clarity, such conviction, such authentic faith that you could trust it to be true for you, too. That's what "*saints*" do. I'm not talking about perfect people. No one is perfect. I'm talking about the kind of saints that the Bible refers to – people who are *in the process* of being sanctified, "*made holy*" by God's grace. When we accept the cleansing forgiveness that God offers to us through Christ's death on the cross and when we open up to allow God's Holy Spirit to shape and mold us so that we love others as Jesus taught us to love, do the good God wants done, and welcome the indwelling Spirit of God ... then we are *becoming "saints"* – people who in quite down-to-earth, everyday ways are learning to walk with God, to follow Jesus, to bear the fruits of his Spirit.

My hunch is that it has been plain, ordinary, everyday saints who earnestly wanted to be Christian – those are probably the folks who have helped you trust in the Lord.

Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher. Maybe it was your grandmother. My grandmothers were special to me in that way. Maybe it was your parents, your friend, your neighbor. If you have faith, I expect you have some saints for whom to be grateful ... and all the saints before them, generation after generation, who took the Christian faith seriously, allowed it to impact their lives, and were willing to let their children, their students, their neighbors, their friends see faith at work in them.

Who sees Christian faith *in you*? I'm not inviting you to be a show-off. I'm just asking you to be vulnerable, to let others see that you know you are frail, but that you nevertheless trust God, you pray to the Lord, you sincerely want to follow Jesus and to do God's Will. The faith passed down by saints of every generation from the disciples until now, *depends on you* to make it available to those who come after you. *So let it show!* Humbly. In bits and pieces. It's okay, it's important that your friends and neighbors find out that you pray, that you ponder the meaning of the scriptures, that you wish you could understand more about all that God wants done in this world, that you earnestly want to be part of bringing God's peace, God's justice, and God's righteousness into this world, and that you are trying to overcome the patterns of sin and selfishness in your own life. It's okay – it is important for *you* to be an *authentic saint* in the eyes of others, so that they can yearn to be part of God's Kingdom, too.

We all know we fall short. But God keeps inviting us to work at living out our faith. Others will be able to believe if they can see that we are able to believe.

This past January, I went with my parents to the La Verne Church of the Brethren in California – their home church. During worship we were invited to give thanks for the saints

who have helped us believe ... by lighting a candle in their honor. That's what I invite you to do today as we sing our closing hymns. On this All Saints Day, let your candle represent people who passed the torch of faith from one generation to the next, and reaffirm your faith that they are now in God's care, awaiting that time when we, with them, will rejoice around the banquet tables of the Kingdom of heaven, fully tasting the fellowship – the joyful fellowship of belonging to God forever.

When I lit my candle in January, I lit it to give thanks for my father-in-law and my mother-in-law. But that was not all. I also lit it to entrust the life and spirit of a tiny, unborn baby into God's care – a grandbaby we will not see in this lifetime because its pregnancy ended in miscarriage. *You* may have many thoughts to bring before the Lord as you light a candle today. I simply invite you to come and rejoice in the fellowship of God's people – for the promise of Jesus is clear: all who trust in him, all who take up their cross to follow him, will be brought safely into his kingdom, gathered into his eternal banquet of joyful fellowship.

Those who can handle walking up steps, please come up to the table on the platform. Light a candle and stand it up in the sand. Please place your candles towards the back of the box, so that others can reach in without getting scorched. Others can come to the table in front of the choir.

Let us rejoice in the Life-giving power of Jesus, whose victory over death opens our way into eternal, joyful fellowship with God, as we light our candles.

Candles of Remembrance

Hymns *Children of the Heavenly Father* 616 *When Peace, Like a River* 336