

CRAB CAKES AND COMMANDS

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Texts: Psalm 1 and John 17: 6-8, 13-19

This year the blue crab catch is expected to be larger than last year. I know that is not a headline in the *New York Times*, but it has been on the front page of the *Star Democrat*, the newspaper of Eastern Maryland. The amount of the blue crab catch may not mean much here in New York City, but it means a great deal in Neavitt, the tiny town in which I live when I am not living in Chelsea and working here with all of you.

Neavitt is a place that about 65 people call home. It is in Maryland, on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, and when folk gather at the Post Office at this time of year the conversation is about blue crabs. The watermen, those people who make their living by harvesting the bay and its tributaries, will argue about the best way to catch them. Is it traps or trot lines that will bring in the most of these succulent shellfish that are held to be almost sacred in that part of the world? (If you really want to know the difference between traps and trot lines ask either my husband Bob or me at coffee hour)

Then there will be arguments about how to cook the crabs. Do you clean them before plunging them in the water? Is the water fresh or slightly salty? When do you add the Old Bay Seasoning? And how do you pick the crabs, that is get the meat out of them after they have been cooked? Do you tear off the legs first or pull away the back shell and slit the crab in half? Hour long arguments can develop over any of these questions. But by far the most heated arguments are around the recipes for Crab Cakes. Egg or no egg? Bread crumbs or no? Each person, sure that his or her recipe for crab cakes is the perfect one, can give you chapter and verse on the details of the recipe. And let me give you a small piece of advice: Never mention mayonnaise when discussing crab cakes with someone from the Eastern Shore, no mayonnaise in the perfect crab cake.

The strange thing is, it seems to me, that the perfect crab cake is not the result of exact, precise ingredients. The perfect crab cake does not come about because of the exact measurement of Old Bay Seasoning or the precise timing of the cooking. The perfect crab cake is perfect because it is shared with a child who for the first time ever went out in a boat, caught a dozen crabs and cooked them, all the while talking with a grown up who listens to him and lets him know that he is important and capable and loved.

A perfect crab cake is one that is eaten with an extended family that has had some troubles but is now back together enjoying not just the food but the fellowship and forgiveness that marks the gathering. A perfect crab cake is one that is part of a meal served and prepared by people from many different countries and many different traditions – people who do not allow their differences to divide them but rather allow the variety that is present to enliven the gathering,

But we human beings often forget what makes a situation as close to perfect as we are going to experience in this world. We want precise, exact recipes, we like detailed directions, we want specific laws. We like it when you follow the directions of a recipe and the dish comes out exactly the way you expected. We are law abiding and we expect that things will work out for us.

We don't expect to be arrested or to get into trouble. But life is not like that is it? Sometimes we put everything into the recipe in the proper amounts, and it doesn't taste at all the way we expected. Sometimes we get into trouble even when we have followed the laws exactly. And often our response is to try to make the law ever more precise.

I suspect we do the same things with what we consider to be God's law. We hone or sharpen the Ten Commandments; we add words, we give explanations. We take the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and dissect them trying desperately to wring out of them every nuance of meaning.

We are constantly trying to perfect documents like our denomination's constitution, the *Book of Order*. Rarely, if ever, do we delight in the law of the Lord. That's what the Psalmist says in Psalm 1, which was our first lesson this morning. "Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord." The older versions of this Psalm use the word blessed: "Blessed are those who delight in the law of the Lord." Note that it does not say, "God loves those who follow God's laws."

We know that God's love is not the result of anything that we do. God's love is given as a gift. That gift is the result of God's nature. It is God's very nature to love us, not because of who we are or what we do but because of who God is.

So what is the law of the Lord and what do we do to delight in it?

Well, let me begin with what, I believe, we should not do. We should not add more detail, more specificity. To delight in the law of the Lord does not mean that we should follow the pattern of our ancestors in the faith who expanded the Ten Commandments to over 600 specific laws that covered every action, every word, every moment of one's life. It does not mean that we dissect, draw and quarter, analyze every command that exists in this library that we call the Bible. Nor does it mean that we should completely ignore or even argue with those who think such an analysis is essential to our very salvation our relationship with God.

To help us think about what it does mean to delight in the law of the Lord, let's look at the prayer that the writer of the Gospel of John puts in the mouth of Jesus prior, just prior to his betrayal, trial, death, resurrection and ascension. In trying to prepare his followers, both then and now, for how they were and we are to live Jesus says, "I am coming to you and I speak these things in the world so that they (that is my followers) may have my joy made complete in themselves."

Jesus knows that after his death and resurrection he will leave this world to be forever with God. And Jesus leaves the world knowing that it is now up to his followers to love and care for the world that belongs to God who created the world and all that is in it. Jesus uses the words

“that they may have my joy made complete in themselves”. The instructions he has given by words and by deeds are the pattern for living that will bring to the followers joy. I think it is not a great stretch to say that Jesus is talking about that quality that the Psalmist called “delight in the law of the Lord.”

During his ministry, Jesus was asked about what was the greatest commandment. We remember well his answer. He says: “ The first and greatest command is that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” But he does not leave it there.

Jesus goes on to say that there is a second command, so like the first that it is inextricably bound together with it. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In one of the accounts of this teaching Jesus also says, “On this hang all the law and the prophets.”

So this is the law of the Lord, given to the beloved ones; this is what we are to do as cherished, extravagantly loved children of God; love God and neighbor. Delight in it. Now each of us can spend a good deal of time figuring out the best ways for us to do that. But the basic pattern is given over and over again. Love God and neighbor.

It is like those crab cakes with which I began... crab cakes are basically crab meat made into little cakes. How we catch them, how we cook them, how we pick them, what we add to the crab meat or even where we buy them already made (some of us are New Yorkers after all) It is up to each of us to figure out the best way for us to do all of that.

We are loved beyond our ability to understand... to respond to that extravagant unconditional love, we are called to live out the command. Love God and neighbor. Let us be happy. Let us delight in the law of the Lord.