

## TASTE AND SEE

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Psalm 34:1-10, 22

Genesis 1:26-31

From the beginning, we have yearned to find some image of the Creator among us. In ancient society, it was common to portray the image of gods by constructing huge, larger than life statues. If you journey to the Valley of the Kings, you can see how the Egyptians surrounded themselves with these giant reminders of the sacred presence. Those images reassured them their world had order and beauty. But in the Jewish and Christian traditions the only image we have of God is human life. “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This means that if we are going to be reassured of the presence of a God who creates order and beauty, the image is going to have to be found in our own lives.

Immediately after stating we were created in God’s image, our text from the book of Genesis describes two implications of this. The first is that we are commanded to work hard and have dominion over the earth. The second mark of this image is that we are commanded to enjoy the fruit of the garden which God has called good. Most of us stopped listening after the first command. We are better at working than we are at enjoying.

I am a Calvinist and I believe that we glorify God with our work, but only if our work allows us to enjoy God more. So a pretty important question to be asking about your work is: “Does it help you know and enjoy God?” I am not suggesting that work should always be fun. But it is important to remember that work was God’s idea. God is a worker and God invites you to demonstrate the image of God through the joy of participating in God’s good work of creation that pushes back the darkness and chaos with beauty and order.

It is a rather elegant job description that you have. It doesn’t matter if you are working in an office, a classroom, hospital, church, or a kitchen, one of the sacred functions of work is to develop a more elegant life. That is why we knock ourselves out to get the numbers right, pass the exam, heal the sick, write the report, and get the food on the table. It is all a way of participating in God’s elegant work in creation. You can be Joe Blow working at the Diner or Joe Biden working at the White House. It is always a work of elegance if it is done with the joy of working with God.

Of all the accusations leveled against Christianity, perhaps the most threatening is the one uttered by Nietzsche who claimed that Christians have no joy in this life. Joy is at the heart of all the work we do in the church. All of our worship, programs, ministries of compassion and mission are rooted in the great joy that we live and work in God’s garden.

Joy isn’t something that can be analyzed or even explained. It can only be entered. That is why we do nothing more important than worship, which is always a symbolic coming to the Lord’s Table. We gather at this table on this World Communion Sunday as

thankful sons and daughters of God who have been adopted into the triune communion with Father, Son, and Spirit. Here we enter into a joy with God who is found not only at the table, but as we taste and see here, God is found in all of life. Even when it feels like our lives are so inelegant, or when our hearts and bodies are breaking apart, we find joy in communing with a Savior who holds our lives in the broken body and poured out blood of Christ.

That work of Christ is what makes our lives elegant and even joyful. This is what is behind of all of the teachings of both the Old and New Testament. The Bible isn't just a book of rules. It is a description of what life looks like when you are in communion with God. Through communion men and women stand in the midst of the world as joyful, elegant priests who know where the world comes from, who can find God in the midst of all its fruits, and who taste and see that God is good. And then the image of God is restored in your life.

When I was growing up, there were two women in my life who had a tremendous impact on how I turned out. I loved them both very much but they were as different as they could be. One, of course, was my mother who was elegant, refined and cultured. The other was my Grandmother DeGarmo who was, well, none of that. Neither of them had very much money and both feared the Great Depression would reappear any day. But they responded to the volatility of life in ways that were as different as the ways they communicated their love. These great differences were symbolized by the tables they prepared for supper.

My mother took every opportunity to use the lace table cloth, her best china, and her silver candlestick holders that were always polished. Sunday dinners, in particular, we ate in the dining room while listening to classical music. She taught me most of the elegant table manners I couldn't forget now if I wanted to: Wash your hands first and keep one of them in your lap at all times, use the smaller fork for the salad, speak in soft tones, stand when a lady comes to the table, and by all means try not to spill your juice. Eating at my mother's table taught me early in life that being elegant takes effort: it's a lot of work.

Grandmother DeGarmo lived on a farm and served every meal at the kitchen table which was always covered with a red and white checked vinyl table cloth that took a spill pretty well. There was only one fork at her table, and if it fell on the ground, you just had to wipe it off on the paper napkin. It was never long before someone told a joke at that table, which would always make my Grandmother DeGarmo laugh so hard that she would have to wipe the tears from her eyes. There were always aunts and uncles and cousins at the kitchen table which always had room for anyone who happened to drop by at dinner. My mother was also a great entertainer, by the way, but she was considerably more organized about it.

As a pastor who presides each month at the Lord's Table, I often think about those two tables of my childhood. Like most congregations, our church serves communion with a dignity and elegance that would make my mother proud. The elements are laid out carefully and served in good order. Everyone maintains a prayerful attitude in coming to the table. All the speech is in soft reassuring tones. The music is usually something classical—and always beautiful. And the very last thing any pastor wants to do is to spill a drop of the juice on the table.

The argument I keep having in the back of mind during all of this is that the theology of the sacrament is also at home with my Grandmother DeGarmo's table. It doesn't matter how vigorously we wash our hands, we still come to the Lord's Table with all our righteousness looking like filthy rags. The fact of the matter is that we are all dogs who are looking for a crumb of grace to fall our way. And instead of being worried about how we are performing at life, communion with God is supposed to make us joyful.

That's why Eucharist has always been another name the church has used for this sacrament. The word Eucharist means thankful. It describes how grateful we are that we who were strangers to the grace of God are now given a place at the table. Maybe even Jesus is so thankful we are here, he'd like to laugh until he cries out of sheer delight.

Now, I'm not about to suggest that we start using a red and white vinyl table cloth for the Lord's Table. Maybe that's because there is too much of mother lurking in my heart, but I'm actually very thankful about that. I loved my holidays on the farm, but Lord knows I would not be who I am today without my mother's teachings. It has taken me a while to figure this out, but her little lessons on elegant table manners had a higher purpose to them. She was actually helping me know how to behave as a gracious man. And that's a pretty relevant connection to the Lord's Table as well. If receiving the sacrament of grace doesn't change our behavior, then we have to doubt if we're really paying attention at the table. So this table needs to be a place where we are made both joyful *and* elegant.

As I listen to the harsh rhetoric of the current political debates, or the debates in the denominations today, or even in our families, I wonder if we couldn't all use some of my mother's table lessons on gracious elegance. Then I think, yes, but we also need to let Grandmother DeGarmo teach us how to stop taking ourselves so seriously. That's why I know I was blessed to have both of these strong women in my life.

"We all worry about our health, our future, our children, and our work. Sometimes we choose to respond to that with all the laughter and joy we can find at hand. Other times we respond by rising above our fear and facing the future with all the elegance and grace we can muster. Each response reveals the image of God we hope to find.

Both my mother and my grandmother used their table to pass on their precious gifts because they loved me. So does the Lord Jesus Christ love us, and the gifts of both joy and elegance can always be found in this place where we gather at his table. But you have to taste and see that perfect love casts out fear. Then the image of joyful elegance will begin to well up from your soul.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.