

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas may be very far from your thoughts on this summer day, but I want to begin this morning by recalling one of the most enduring, and most ridiculed, of all Christmas traditions. Think for a moment about the holiday food so many people love to hate: fruitcake.

I love fruitcake, but the humble fruitcake is the butt of a thousand jokes. “There is only one fruitcake in the entire world,” quipped comedian Johnny Carson, “and people keep sending it to each other, year after year.” “Why does fruitcake make the perfect gift? Because the U.S. Postal Service hasn’t yet found a way to damage it.”

The reason behind all of these jokes is actually one of the great virtues of fruitcake: it keeps for a very long time without refrigeration.

Did you ever hear of that old tradition of newlyweds putting away a piece of their wedding cake to eat on their first anniversary for good luck? Nowadays, they just stick a slice in the freezer, and a year later, it tastes just awful.

But how did they ever come up with that tradition in the days before freezers? Maybe you’ve already guessed the answer: the traditional wedding cake used to be a fruitcake.

And, yes, it’s true and true to tradition, back in 2011, Prince William and Kate Middleton’s wedding cake was, indeed, a fruitcake. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” says Jesus, “but for the food that endures for eternal life.” (And, no, he wasn’t talking about fruitcake!)

Jesus makes that statement just after he’s fed a huge crowd with five barley loaves and two fish. He seems concerned that the members of the crowd — they of the beaming faces and the growling stomachs — have, because of the meal, missed his message.

The early missionaries to India used to talk about “rice Christians”: people who would show up without fail, eagerly professing their love for Jesus — whenever rice was being distributed — but who never darkened the church door at any other time.

Maybe Jesus is muttering to himself about “bread-and-fish Christians” as he challenges the crowd to seek the food that does not perish! “I am the bread of life,” he tells them. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Those words of Jesus would have had quite an impact on the people of his own day: for theirs was a culture that knew no milk in plastic jugs; that never heard of refrigeration, or Tupperware, or Ziploc bags. In that culture, unless you dried it in the sun, or salted it down, or winnowed it and stowed it in the granary, you had to eat it right away. Otherwise, it would go bad.

The gathering of food was a deadly serious business to the people of Jesus' time. It occupied most of their time, in fact. If you needed it, or you wanted it, then you grew it yourself — or you bartered for it in the marketplace and you ate it that very day.

Food that doesn't perish: what nonsense! (Obviously, they'd never heard of fruitcake.) What wonderful, glorious nonsense this Galilean rabbi is speaking!

History, however, will prove this is no nonsense. Although his enemies imagine that by nailing Jesus to a cross they will end his little crusade, they have no concept of the power they will unleash by means of that cross. Jesus will rise on the third day, and the good news of his victory will eventually echo into every corner of the world. The bread of life does not perish.

In the mid- to late-1940s and early 1950s, when the communists threw the missionaries out of mainland China, there were many in our country who feared for the future of Christianity in that land.

Many wondered what had become of the millions of Chinese Christians behind the dark cloak of secrecy imposed by Chairman Mao — until, with détente, the curtain was finally lifted, and it became clear that the church had not only survived, but had grown!

True, many once-magnificent sanctuaries are still being used as factories or warehouses, but that doesn't stop the Chinese Christians. They meet in house churches. And their numbers continue to grow.

It was the 16th-century reformer Theodore Beza who once remarked of the church that it is “an anvil that has worn out many a hammer.”

“Do not work for the food that perishes,” says the Lord, “but for the food that endures for eternal life.”

And this is what we say is true of the communion bread of which we partake, here in this place. On one level, there's nothing exceptional about it. Yet on another level, God allows it to be something very special, something exceedingly holy. Truly, this is “food that endures to eternal life.”

Recently, I read the story of a teacher whose job was to visit sick children in a big-city hospital and help them keep up with their lessons. When she was given the name and hospital room number of one particular boy, as was her practice, she first called his regular teacher and learned that his class was studying, among other things, nouns and verbs.

It wasn't until the visiting teacher got to the door of the boy's room that she discovered he was on the burn unit. She wasn't prepared for the sight of a badly burned little boy, racked with terrible pain.

Yet, this was her job: she had agreed to come, and so she walked into his room and blurted out something about being the boy's teacher, and how she'd come to teach him nouns and verbs.

The grammar lesson did not go well. The patient was uncomfortable. He found it hard to concentrate. As for the teacher, she wondered about the wisdom of putting this critically-injured little boy through such an exercise.

The next day, a nurse from the burn unit came up to that teacher and asked her, "What on earth did you do to that boy?" The teacher was about to apologize, but the nurse went on, "We've been very worried about him, but ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. Now he's fighting back, responding to treatment. For whatever reason, he's decided to live."

Later on, after he'd left the hospital, the boy explained. The nurse was right. He had completely given up hope — until he saw that teacher. Looking at her as she stood at the foot of his bed, he said to himself, "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and verbs with a dying boy, would they?"

Holy Communion is like that. On one level, there's nothing exceptional about the bread or wine, any more than there's anything exceptional about a lesson on nouns and verbs. Yet, the wonder of this meal is not what's on the menu, but who's on the guest list.

For everyone who comes to this table is a sinner — invited here by sheer, unmerited grace.

The wonder of this meal is that Christ deigns to be our host at all, that he comes to offer us ordinary bread that is — by some mysterious means we can scarcely comprehend — at the same time the bread of life, the bread of heaven, the imperishable food that is offered us for no money, and for no price.

Remember, as you receive the sacrament, that this bread is for you — because you are worth it. You are worth it because the host at this banquet, Jesus Christ, says you are. He has died for all our sins — and he has invited us, personally, to partake of this bread that endures. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Alan Goertemiller, Pastor  
Pilgrim Lutheran Church of Indianapolis, Inc.