

## “Let ‘er Rip!”

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Dr. Fred Craddock was one of America's best preachers; and one of my mentors. His sermons were easy to remember—and tempting to plagiarize. I recall one sermon in particular—how he introduced it: moved into his topic. My memory may not be exact; but it went something like this:

Sometime in the not too distant past, a person, or persons, unknown, broke into the church's library, where she keeps her vocabulary, and stole one of the church's words. It was an ancient word, steeped in the rich traditions of the church's past; but it hadn't been used in church for a while; and so it wasn't missed, at first. Still, it was a loss.

Of course, the church could get along well without the word; she has more than enough words for every occasion. Still it is a bit irritating to know something of your own has been taken and is probably being misused by someone who has no idea of its original function.

The word to which Dr. Craddock referred was “charisma;” “charismatic;” and, what he described has happened frequently through the church's history, with many words; and, today I'm thinking of another word. The word is “Celebrate”.

It was not missing long. It soon turned up in a football locker room, where a reporter said the team was “celebrating” a national championship. Overnight the word was no longer the church's word; it belonged to the world. A popular music group made the “top twenty” with a song, whose lyrics were, “Celebrate Good Times, Come On!”

Some in the church wanted to take the word back; but others thought it was not a good idea. After all, when a word has been out running the streets for awhile, it's difficult to reclaim it. When you use it in the classroom or in the pulpit, the listeners remember where they last heard or saw the word, and immediately you're misunderstood. When the church tried to use the word, “celebrate,” it now meant, “party hardy!” “Whoop-te-do!” Loud music, dancing, laughter. Some people consider that inappropriate behavior in church.

When the church had it to herself, it had more dignity. It meant to solemnize, to commemorate with ceremony and ritual. Weddings and important ordinances and sacraments were “celebrated” with Holy pronouncements and words of scripture and long-standing tradition.

Now that the word has absorbed worldly meanings one has to be careful talking about “celebrating” the Lord's Supper, for example. When the world says, “celebrate”, there's hot music and hand-clapping and dancing. When the church says, “celebrate”, we all stand and sing the Doxology.

The difficulty is not totally in the world's appropriation of the word. The

church's concern for "dignity" as obligatory in its worship is, itself, misdirected; and to say anything is the only "right" way to worship is without solid biblical foundation. I believe there is room in the church's worship and mission for celebration as the world knows the word; and I offer as evidence the following story from the Hebrew Scriptures. It's recorded in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of II Samuel.

David became king of Israel, following the death of Saul. He finally had defeated the Philistines, who'd been a constant thorn in their side, and had united the kingdom, which until this point had been a loose confederation of tribes with divided loyalties. And he chose Jerusalem as his capital city.

Now it's time for David to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, to occupy its proper place in the Tabernacle he's built. With great ceremony and reverence, but also with celebration, the Ark is brought out of storage and transported across the countryside toward Jerusalem.

As the procession nears Jerusalem, David is overcome with gratitude for God's many blessings, and he begins to celebrate. We take up the story in verse 12:

<p><i>(2 SAMUEL 6:14-23 NRSV) David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. <sup>15</sup>So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. <sup>16</sup>As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart. <sup>17</sup>They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. <sup>18</sup>When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, <sup>19</sup>and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and wom-</i></p>	<p><i>en, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat,<sup>[a]</sup> and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes. <sup>20</sup>David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" <sup>21</sup>David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD. <sup>22</sup>I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, I shall be held in honor."</i></p>
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One of the mysteries of life has been the question of what a Scotsman wears under his kilts. There's no mystery what David wore under his ephod. An ephod was a short garment like a Greek toga. And as David leaped and danced before the Lord, he exposed himself, much to the embarrassment of his wife, who gave him what-for when he got home.

She thought a king should act with more dignity; especially since the king was her husband. In particular, she felt the king's behavior in worship should demonstrate more dignity.

But David said, "You ain't seen nothing, yet! I *will* celebrate before the Lord; and I will become even more undignified." Of this same David the scriptures say later, "He was a man after God's own heart."

I don't suggest worship should follow the immodest example of Israel's greatest king. But, while dignity has its proper place in worship, so do uninhibited expressions of joy and celebration. There's no necessary connection, biblical or otherwise, between dignity and reverence; nor is there a necessary conflict between reverence and celebration.

There may be, however, an connection—at least implied—between dignity and boredom. I have an idea that one thing that keeps some people away from church is the impression that "dignity" is the primary characteristic of our worship.

If it is totally appropriate to celebrate an NCAA championship with wild shouting and uninhibited bodily gestures, when that honor most likely will be taken away a year later, must we resist the temptation to tap our foot, or clap our hands, or (gasp!) lift our hands while singing "Christ the Lord is Risen, Today! Alleluia!"?

Today's epistle reading gives ample reason to celebrate:

<p>(1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-57 NRSV) <i>Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup>in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup>For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must</i></p>	<p><i>put on immortality. <sup>54</sup>When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:</i></p> <p><i>"Death has been swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup>"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"</i></p>
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Upon hearing these words of Easter, cannot God's people say, "Amen!" Cannot God's people offer rousing applause for God has done in Christ Jesus? Cannot God's people shout, "Praise the Lord!"?

If the king of Israel can forget himself to the point of immodesty, and still be called "a man after God's own heart," is it possible that what God wants from all God's people is enthusiastic, heart-felt, and maybe even undignified, celebration?

So, I say, "Let 'r Rip!" Let the celebration begin! Christ is risen! Alleluia!