

Extravagance

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This year a beloved member of our church passed away and left behind more than one thousand cookbooks. Since one of the many things Charlene was known for at the church was her cooking, her family brought huge piles of these cookbooks in to church for all of us to peruse at coffee hour a couple of Sundays. We were invited to take any we wanted, as a way to remember Charlene and to be thankful for her life of generous hospitality.

Well, these cookbooks at coffee hour became a source of delight and good conversation as strangers stood side by side laughing at some of the dated material. We were laughing at recipes that called for two and three sticks of butter and heavy cream, and all without apology or any kind of alternative healthy option. But I think I ended up nabbing the two very best cookbooks of a bygone era, one put out by the Republican Party of Nebraska featuring a recipe entitled, I kid you not, *GOP Beans*.

The other treasure I found was a cookbook published in 1966, *Martinis and Whipped Cream: The New Carbo-Cal Way to Lose Weight and Stay Slim*. As the cover put it, "With this proven method, you may eat as much as you're eating now, fried foods, appetizers, gravies, sauces, dressings, caviar, ice cream, even eat between meals, and you should lose weight safely and stay slim naturally." I had to learn more.

As you may have guessed from the title, *Martinis and Whipped Cream* was a very early diet book based on a low carb diet which insisted that the dieter avoid sugars and starches, but unlike the more austere diets of our day, this one included things like martinis and whipped cream. Here's how they described one man's typical day on this diet back in 1966, and it's like entering a culinary world from another planet.

Breakfast: Four or five ounces of beef, kidneys, lamb, fish, or bacon. One slice of dry toast.

(Dry? Presumably to avoid fat?)

Lunch: Five or six ounces of meat, any vegetable except potato, one ounce of dry toast, two or three glasses of claret, Madeira, or sherry wine.

Supper: Three or four ounces of meat and a glass or two of wine.

Nightcap: Gin, whisky, or wine.

Analyzing this day's typical diet, complete with a minimum of six drinks, the author explained that it had "all the necessary vitamins and minerals that the body requires." And here's the key to this particular diet's success: "It consisted almost entirely of protein, fat, and alcohol," which is the diet that many people stay on through most of the holiday season. You just didn't realize how healthy it was. Or at least how healthy it was in 1966. Good times. We can laugh about it now. It's easy to see the excess of decades gone by. But it's more difficult to see excess when you're in the middle of it.

I was doing some Christmas shopping in a very crowded store, one of those no frills discount places where you really have to kiss a lot of frogs before finding a prince, if you know what I mean. But I had found a lot of good stuff. The sign on the

restroom said I had to leave all that merchandise outside, but when I came back out, all my Christmas shopping was gone. As hard as it had been to find all that good stuff, I beseeched every store clerk I saw to ask if they had seen my things, because if they'd been put back, I'd never find them all again. Or what if another shopper had taken all my bargains? I appealed to the sympathy of the shop clerks to put out an A.P.B. on my stuff, explaining that they were Christmas presents that I had spent significant time carefully selecting. So, in order to find my cart, they asked me to describe my gifts.

"Well, there's a size four short pair of pants, another dress and skirt the same size, a small sweater, and a size four jacket, petite, with a cute scarf that kind of ties it all together." "Oh, I see," she said. "So we're looking for a bunch of Christmas presents, all of which are like...for a small, rather short woman, say...exactly your size." "Hey, I never said who the presents were for, did I?" We finally found my things, which someone had hung up to keep them safe. "I hope your twin sister enjoys all those gifts," the clerk said. "Oh stop it." No, it's hard to spot excess when you're in the middle of it, when you're the one swearing by the martinis and whipped cream diet with no clue that future generations will wonder what you were thinking.

Lately, given the economy, in the holiday season of excess, I've really had in my prayers and on my heart all those folks who are unemployed or underemployed. I'm tired of hearing about this jobless recovery, which by the way is not a moneyless recovery. The so-called recovery, money and jobs, doesn't seem to be trickling down to regular folks. From the janitors who have to clean more rooms to the folks who are patching together consulting work as well as their own benefits, it's a hard time, particularly when everyone around you is shopping. One person poignantly summed up her situation saying, "After volunteering at my local food bank for three years, I became a client two months ago. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, even though I was surrounded by supportive friends who served me."

Friends, when you come to church on Christmas Eve, you do a brave thing. You stand at the intersection of excess and justice, because as people of faith, we can't indulge in one and not care about the other. On the one hand, we celebrate with glorious music, good food, candlelight at the dining room table, and candlelight here in church. We enter into a sort of divine extravagance that spills over into our ordinary lives and makes this night as holy as the night Jesus was born.

But in the meantime, as followers of Jesus, we have the gift of knowing that he grew up to be a man, who as far as I can tell spent his adult life unemployed and somehow changed the world. Dependent upon the generosity of others, Jesus was tough on the rich, gentle with the poor, and brave in the face of injustice. This Christmas Eve, I'm particularly eager for him to get here.

God could have come to earth in any form, but God came to earth as a helpless baby, nowhere to lay his head, to parents whose marriage was tenuous, both personally and by the rules of the state, parents who had no health insurance and no support system other than the compassion of strangers, parents who would soon leave Nazareth and raise that holy baby as undocumented immigrants in Egypt until they returned to their land where their grown son scandalized people by eating with tax collectors and sinners saying, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Now that's extravagant.

Out in the world, there's always some new get rich quick plan or a ridiculous

diet that can't deliver on its promises or a bait and switch in which the average person doesn't win. But in the end, we can't survive on a diet of martinis and whipped cream. We need more. And as all those cookbooks demonstrated, what you serve at the table, the latest styles or fads, those trends come and go. But when we remember our special meals, it's seldom the food. It's the love behind the food. Whether it had two sticks of warm butter or three sticks of crisp celery, heavy cream or cream of wheat, what we remember is that someone loved us enough to cook for us and that there was a place for us at the table.

No matter what, no matter who, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here into the extravagant love of Christ. For a child has been born to us, a son given to us: authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. May this extravagant gift fill you with joy and compassion, giving bread to those who have none and a hunger and thirst for justice to those who have plenty. Noel.