

Pastor's Message – 9/6/2020
Exodus 12:1-14

The Passover meal we heard about in our Bible reading is the most important event in all the history of the Jewish people, but there are elements in the telling of the story that don't sit well with us: too many instructions, too much detail, all this talk about blood, bitter salad greens and unleavened bread, roasting the whole animal, the head, legs and internal organs. But perhaps the most troubling aspect of the story of the Passover is the image of a God who would strike down the first-born - presumably including some children - of any nation.

This would be a much easier text if it were not for those verses which have God killing the oldest boy in all Egyptian families. The mindset when this was written was that everything that happens is willed and done by God. If it were not so, it could not have happened. That incriminates God and makes God guilty of creating and doing harm. That notion has God giving life and taking it away again. I wrestle with that notion of God.

I have had the privilege of leading a number of funerals already since being appointed to Waupun and a number of funerals in the course of my pastoral ministry, and each one has me thinking about death, even my own. As Christians we have a paradoxical relationship with death. On the one hand, we, with Paul, who wrote many of the books in the New Testament, see death as an enemy whose destruction is already declared in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (I Corinthians 15:26). On the other hand, also with Paul, we affirm that we are baptized into the death of Jesus, and only through experiencing a death like His in baptism are we promised the hope of a resurrection like His (Romans 6:4-8). So already, within some of the most famous passages from Paul's Letters, we encounter death as at once both enemy and gateway to life.

So it is, perhaps, in some of our own experiences. A loved one is suffering intensely, with no likelihood of recovery and perhaps no good way to ease the suffering. We do not want her to die, yet death would at least end this suffering. And the paradox continues, even experientially. Maybe we have welcomed death in the moment, but then the terrible accumulated series of felt losses we call grief comes flooding in, and death seems to have turned from friend to cruel enemy. The paradox keeps turning, as this very suffering in the face of death often opens up into channels of healing and strength in time.

I have heard, on many occasions of funerals, people say they wish they were getting together for other reasons, but funerals and memorial services are rituals that are important for families and for churches. Families and churches and communities are suffering during this time of pandemic and social distancing at the inability to gather as we once did to form community and

support those who grieve. Funerals are important events for reminding us that we are in this life together just as the Passover meal for the Jews is a key event to forming a sense of community.

Through the Passover celebration as described in this Sunday's Bible reading, God prepared the people for deliverance from oppression and death and to establish themselves in a homeland given to them. Through the yearly celebration of the festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread, the Jewish people remember the heart of the nature of God as gracious, merciful and deliverer of the oppressed. In Holy Communion, Christians claim all of this about God and identify Jesus Christ as the one through whom all peoples are delivered from the power of sin and death.

God establishes the event and then announces that "This is a day to remember. Each year, from generation to generation, you must celebrate it as a special festival to the LORD. This is a law for all time."

We tend not to like laws. We tend not to like rituals and things we have to do over and over. But there are rules we have to follow: good rules. There are also foolish rules. Sometimes we can have too many rules.

Did you know that in the city of Toronto, Canada, e.g. there are over 180,000 laws? For example:

- at one time, a woman's bathing suit had to cover from neck to knee
- spitting can cost you a \$15 fine
- you cannot have more than six pets at home, and no more than three dogs
- you cannot have a lizard longer than two yards, or snakes that are more than three yards in length

I'm sure the city of Waupun or the town you live in has some obscure laws which may have made sense when they were written but do not any longer.

For us as Christians, the story of the occasion of the Passover meal naturally reminds us of Jesus' Last Supper and, by extension, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Jesus and his disciples were in the midst of celebrating that commemorative holiday meal, when Jesus embarked on words and actions so familiar to us, but undoubtedly strange and troubling to the disciples.

The Jewish observance of the Passover meal had acquired layers of symbolic elements and practices, and from its inception it was clearly understood as a teaching tool, e.g. the ritual of Passover includes the line, "When your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?'" (Exodus 12:26). The same answer is given every year.

But in Jesus' association of the bread with His body and the cup with His blood, the old Jewish Passover meal took on new meaning for Christians. For us, it is not the symbolism of unleavened bread that is meaningful but rather the

symbolism of broken bread. We do not partake of the lamb and the bitter herbs, but only the bread and the cup.

The Lord specified to Moses and the people that “This is a day to remember. Each year, from generation to generation, you must celebrate it as a special festival to the LORD. This is a law for all time.” And we are reminded likewise of the ordinance of Christ at the Last Supper: "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Some folks may remember when Holy Communion was observed quarterly or whenever the preacher would come. Some Christian churches celebrate Communion even less often. United Methodists have landed, for the most part, on monthly Communion – on the first Sunday of the month. Coming from a Roman Catholic background, I grew up used to Communion every Sunday and at every Mass.

In the mad dash of our western world, we often tend to grab food at a fast food restaurant and eat on the run. Take out is the rule of the day now. We are not the first to do this. The Hebrews were instructed to hurriedly eat the first Passover fully clothed and ready to depart (v. 11). The meal was a sign of the old life of slavery they were about to leave behind and the new life to which the Lord was leading. They were to be prepared to follow at a moment's notice.

The Lord's Supper is also fast food; it is not designed to fill us forever but to strengthen us in our spiritual journey as the Lord's pilgrim people. We are encouraged and we would do well to share the Lord's Supper more frequently.

But there's a difference between being rushed and being ready. Fast food, as we know it, is rushed; the unleavened bread and wine of the Passover feast is a meal of readiness and expectation.

Here's where we're going with this: *Jesus' last meal is a meal we Christians keep eating and eating. We do this because it's a meal that speaks to the meaning of Jesus' life and death.* It is a meal that speaks to the meaning of our own life and death. Our Communion meal is one that is taken reverently and with a special awareness of what we are doing and what it means and how important it is. It is not usually a meal with laughter and jokes or even smiling, though it should be understood as a celebration and a meal of thanksgiving. It matters what we do today.

One December afternoon many years ago, a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to pick up their children after the last pre-Christmas session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his or her hands the "surprise," the brightly wrapped package on which the class had been working for weeks.

One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents all at the same time, slipped and fell. The "surprise" flew from his grasp and landed on the tile floor with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child's first reaction was one of stunned silence. But then he set up an inconsolable wail. His father, thinking to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, "Now that's all right. It really doesn't matter, son. It doesn't matter at all."

But the child's mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, dropped to her knees on the floor, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal." And she wept with her son.

The redeeming God in whom we hope is not the parent who dismisses our lives with a pat on the head and murmured assurances that they do not really matter in cosmic terms. It is, rather, the one who falls to the earth beside us, picks up our torn and bleeding spirits, and says, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters eternally."

Children in families who eat 4-7 suppers together each week have been shown in university studies to:

- Eat healthier foods voluntarily when away from home,
- Make higher grades,
- Be more self-confident,
- Be active and involved in more extracurricular activities, and
- Be more socially engaged and adaptable than those who don't.

How is your family doing? How is our church family doing? Do we make a special effort to break the bread and share the cup on Communion Sundays even when we are unable to gather as we once did?

Our Celebration of Communion reminds us of God's overriding love for us; God will do anything that we might be saved and given the opportunity to be with Him forever. That is something worth celebrating and being grateful for. It is a reminder of God's presence and God's love for us every day.

So,

- Celebrate the beginning of each new day with prayer, asking God to show you where he will be at work and where you can help. Be prepared each day to work for what you pray for.
- Take time each day for planning the day ahead. Begin by reviewing yesterday. What did you accomplish? Where did you see God at work? What opportunities did you miss to serve God? Then make your list, set your agenda and look ahead to the coming day, seeing it as a blank canvas upon which God can work within and through you. How can God's purposes be worked in and through me today? How can I reflect God's presence in my life in each event?

"This is a day to remember . . . celebrate it as a special festival to the LORD. This is a law for all time." This is a law that matters.