

<Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149:1-9; Matthew 18:15-20>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I believe I've shared with you before the story of a minister who, upon arriving to a new parish, wanted to start celebrating communion every week in worship. Up until that point, the church members had only gathered for communion, in their words, "on the normal schedule" - that is, once a month. But this new minister, wanting to celebrate the abundance and the nearness of God's gifts, advocated for communion every week. "Just give it a try," he implored. "You might even find that you appreciate it all the more." One particular faithful Elder voiced his skepticism, but was willing to give the idea a chance.

So, the congregation tried it. For a whole month they gathered each week in worship and celebrated Christ's body broken for them. Christ's blood shed for the world. And then they continued the weekly practice for a second month. At the end of the third month, the minister had an occasion to chat with the skeptical Elder, and brought up the topic of weekly communion. "I notice you've been in church every week, I guess you've come around to celebrating the Lord's Table every Sunday we gather?" The minister presumed he had a liturgical convert. "Actually," replied the Elder. "I can't stand it. I'm not about to miss worship, but weekly communion is too much for me."

The minister was flabbergasted. "But why?" he exclaimed. "Well," said the Elder, "now, every time I sit down at any meal and there's bread, all I hear is 'Christ's body broken for you.' And every time I sit down with a glass of wine, all I can think is, 'Christ's blood, shed for the world.' Frankly, it's too much, and I can't stop thinking about Jesus and this Table. Every time I sit down, I see Christ there."

And isn't that the point.

In the Passover story, which we find in our Exodus reading of this morning, there is a very telling line, one which is worth highlighting this morning and any time we revisit this story. But first, remember what it is going on, and what it represents. For generations, the people of God have lived as slaves and servants in Egypt. Initially they had come there because Joseph brought his father Jacob, and all his brothers, to Egypt, to the house of Pharaoh, from Israel because there was a famine in the land. And at that time, Pharaoh's household was happy to receive them, to practice hospitality and welcome and care.

But then, as the Israelites settled, they became first an inconvenience and then a threat in the eyes of the Pharaoh of later generations. The Book of Exodus, and the story of Moses and the people of God, begins with the author reminding us, "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we are...'" (Exodus 1:8-9). And so the people of God were forced into subservient and servile roles, subjugated and held

down, while the people of Egypt benefited from their labors. And during these generations - because this reality of subservience lasted for generations - the people forgot about God. Not in the manner of amnesia, they still understood the concept of God and remembered some of the history; but in the sense of not having any intimate and present knowledge of God. No awareness of God. To them, in that moment, God was a distant and unreachable, unrealized idea. No first-hand, personal knowledge.

And now Moses, after his Divine encounter with the bush from last week's reading, has come to enact liberation on behalf of the people, freeing them from their state in Egypt, but *more than that*, Moses has come to bring the people back to God, to help them once more draw close to God. To know God and to know that *they* are known by God.

This is a key point to bear in mind. Frequently, when we read the Passover story - usually on Maundy Thursday as we approach Easter - we do so in the lens of what God is doing, the lengths to which God goes, to liberate and redeem the people. That is an accurate lens but it is not the complete lens. And the piece we overlook is mentioned by God in that one, very telling line that I mentioned earlier: after all the instructions are given - what kind of animal, when & how to prepare it, how to eat it, marking of the doorposts and lintel with blood - after all of that, God tells the people, "this shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live."

Not for God. God knows where the people live, and the fact that the first nine plagues touched only the Egyptian people and not the Hebrew people proves this. No, this sign, enacted during the Passover feast, is *for the people*. For them, to see, and to know, and to remember. To remind themselves that they are seen by God. Known by God. And invited to know God anew.

In other words, to be in a position that, when they sit at a table, they cannot help but know and be aware of God's presence among them. And in that knowledge, to remember who they are, and whose they are.

Our stories begin around a table. Good or ill, uplifting or challenging, many of us can easily think back to meals around a table in our households, and begin to understand how we view family and connection. Newer parents these days are reminded, time and again, that one of the greatest indicators of achievement and development in elementary school is not the completion of homework but the undistracted time with family around the dinner table. These meals, these tables, bind us together and teach us, remind us who we are and whose we are.

I shared with you a Father Boyle story, a "Father G" story last week, and I have another one for you today. One of the young men Father G had been working with to get out of gang life and out of drug use had relapsed, and ended up back in prison for a short time. When he was released, he went to visit Father G's office to meet with him, but Father G was out running errands and doing visits. The young man sat in the waiting room outside the office, where another former gang member sat at a reception desk. But the young man became more and more agitated the longer he had to wait, not in a

angry sense but in a “can’t sit still” sense. Finally, unable to wait any longer, he approached the receptionist as he returned from the bathroom, and grasping him at the shoulders proclaimed with anguish, “I have forgotten who I am; I need you to remind me.”

Jesus teaches the disciples that, when a member of the community, when a member of the communion they share, has gone astray, then first the aggrieved member should go to them to reconcile and clear the air. If that doesn’t work, then more go. And then finally the whole church. We read these lines as a formula for discipline, as a step-by-step process, but I wonder if we don’t overlook the greater intent underneath it, which is the practice of remembering who we are, and whose we are. Of reminding members of our communion of this when they go astray. We are a people bound together in the Spirit of God, and at Christ’s Table we are reminded who we are.

When I was in seminary, I liked to sit in the very front pew along with the other collegiate and masters students; even in a church about the size of ours, there was always an available seat there. Every month, we would celebrate communion by intinction. Every month, I would be one of the first people to receive communion, and then I would go back and sit in the front pew and watch every other person in the church as they came forward, as they walked by. Each and every person, receiving the body of Christ broken for them, the blood of Christ shed for the world. People I knew. People I didn’t know. People I agreed with. People I disagreed with. Even an ex-girlfriend... And I realized, these are all my people, agree or disagree, like or dislike, known or unknown. At Christ’s Table, these are my people, and I am theirs, and in this, we are bound together and reminded of who God is, too.

When he told the story of the relapsed and recovering young man, Father G concluded with a further observation: “there is always something greater [which] the Table brings us to, and reminds us of...and that thing is greater than what we are in the world.”

At Christ’s Table, we are reminded of who we are, and whose we are, and we are bound together anew. It recalls to our awareness that which is greater than anything we are on our own in the world, and proclaims to us so that we may proclaim to others the love and connection that is waiting for us all to reach out and to claim, to live by. Christ’s teaching was less about the steps of discipline and more about reaffirming the connection we share with one another. The Passover Feast was less about the specific steps of preparation and more about a mindfulness of approach so that we may draw closer to God again. It is a sign for us of something greater to which we are bound, and it is an invitation to remember, and rejoice. Let us prepare to again come to the Table that has been prepared for us. Let us once more be bound together in the Spirit of God. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*