

“The Passover and Holy Communion”

Date: March 24, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: John 13:1-17; Mark 14:12-26; Exodus 12:1-14

Theme: Passover, Communion

Occasion: Maundy Thursday

We have a lot of traditions and rituals that we practice in the church that must seem kind of silly or ridiculous to outsiders. And yet, our lives are enriched by the seemingly impractical things we do, which are symbols of our beliefs and feelings, expressing what may be too deep for words. A story to illustrate what I'm talking about:

A rude American was traveling in the country of China, some years ago, and he ridiculed a Chinese burial custom he happened to observe. He told his interpreter, who was serving as the guide on his tour: “I think it's ridiculous for you to leave food on the grave of your deceased loved ones. When do you think they'll ever get up to eat?”

The older Chinese man smiled and answered, “I guess they'll get up, when *your* loved ones get up to smell the flowers you bring.” You see, to an outsider some of our practices seem silly. But when you understand the meaning behind them, they begin to make sense.

The Passover Meal, which Jews still celebrate, and its counterpart, Holy Communion, are two such practices you need to understand before you criticize them .

The Last Supper was a special meal in many ways. When Jesus and His disciples shared the Passover meal, it was a time for them to remember what God had done for their people. Long ago, God had set his people free from the hand of the Pharaoh, back in the days when the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. This meal celebrated their deliverance from slavery to an oppressive ruler.

Every devout Jew longed to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover Feast. Jesus and his disciples had made that pilgrimage to the holy city. Ahead of time, Jesus had already made arrangements as to where they were celebrate the Feast.

Peter and John were instructed to go into the city itself, and to look for a man carrying a water jug on his head, and he would take them to the house. Usually it was women who carried water on tops of their heads, so this man would have certainly stood out in a crowd.

There is an element of mystery surrounding the location of the Upper Room, is there not? Why did Jesus take this precaution, using prearranged signals to identify their host? Why the secrecy and mystery?

In Luke's gospel, Jesus said, "I have earnestly desired to share this Passover with you before I suffer." Jesus had things he wanted to tell his disciples. But he knew the authorities would be looking for him. Jesus did not want to be arrested before he had time to share this meal, and to tell the disciples the things on his heart.

With an element of mystery surrounding the meeting, Peter and John connect with the man carrying the water and he takes them to a house with a large upper room.

The floor was probably covered with oriental rugs. The room would have been supplied with several couches, or large floppy pillows on which the guests could lie down when they ate.

The table at which they reclined, was only about a foot or two high. The feast began after sundown, so they ate by candlelight. In this Upper Room, the disciples broke bread and celebrated Passover.

Centuries ago, God had heard the cries of his people, oppressed in the land of Egypt. God had pity on them and through a leader by the name of Moses, God set them free. And by doing so, God sent a message to the world that God is on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden of society.

Jesus wanted to share THAT meal with his disciples. On *this* particular occasion, Jesus wanted to be with His friends. Surely on that night, Jesus must have been remembering other Passover meals he had eaten:

Perhaps as a young boy, with his parents, he would have had the privilege of looking for the special piece of matzo, hidden by his father. Then, there would have been other Passovers, when he shared the meal with his friends and neighbors as he grew up.

And now, there was this night; this terrible, lonely night for Jesus. Jesus loved his Jewish traditions. But he wanted to be in that Upper Room with his disciples for another reason. This was to be his last meal on earth, and Jesus wanted to share it with those who were closest to him.

Jesus knew what was about to happen to him. He knew that he would be betrayed, and that he would be arrested and he would suffer. Jesus knew the end was near. This meal was a time to say goodbye. I wonder what Jesus was feeling and thinking about, as he reclined at table with his friends. I wonder.

Surely Jesus must have been remembering all the things he had done with his disciples, how he had met each one, how he had called them by name to leave what they were doing to come and follow him.

Surely Jesus must have been remembering things they had done together, places they had been, people they had met, people who had been changed by meeting Jesus. Was he remembering the crowds who came to hear him preach on the hillside, those who came to be healed? All of these memories, he treasured in his heart.

Jesus looked around the table at the Twelve, each of them special to him, just as each one of us is special to him. There was Peter, the fisherman, so strong, so quick-tempered, soon to deny him. John, the beloved disciple, and James, his brother.

There was Matthew the tax-collector; my how he had changed. There was Andrew and Philip; there was Judas, who was going to betray him. And Thomas, always asking questions, asking for proof. And there was Thaddeus and Bartholomew, James, the Son of Alphaeus and Simon, the Cananean.

How could he let go of them? These were his special friends, with whom he had shared so much. Now it was time to say goodbye.

His time had come. For this he was born. Jesus knew what he must do to follow His Father's will. It was Christ's shining glory that in all things, Jesus was obedient. May we who are his followers allow his prayer to become our own, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

Jesus looked around the room. Perhaps he thought to himself, "Will they remember me when I'm gone? Will they remember the things I have taught them? Or has it all been in vain? I've done my best, but will they remember me, two thousand years from now, in a small village called Erie, Pennsylvania?"

Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and gave it to his disciples, telling them, "This is my body, which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.” And the same with the cup. Jesus said, “This cup which is poured out for you, is the new covenant, in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.”

The disciples were bewildered. They heard his words, but they didn't understand. Not at the time. Only vaguely did they have any awareness of what was taking place. Jesus was saying goodbye. They knew that much. But only later would they fully understand his words that night, after the crucifixion, after his resurrection.

Like the American who didn't understand the Chinese ritual of offering food to their dead, outsiders have often mis-understood holy Communion.

Historically, Christians were accused of worship a “Bread God.” In the early centuries after Christ, rumors circulated that Christians were celebrating cannibalistic feasts, eating real flesh and drinking real blood.

No, we don't eat raw meat or drink warm blood. We are not vampires. However, we do believe that Jesus is truly present in the bread and the wine. That which we eat and drink is actually Christ, pure love from heaven.

This holy meal that we share tonight, we do in remembrance that Christ died for the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the human race. What did God have to give for the salvation of the world? He gave his only begotten Son, Jesus our Lord.

Tonight we celebrate the solemn memory of Christ's last supper with his disciples. AND, we experience anew his living presence with us. Christ is with us in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. In humility, let us come to the Lord's Table. Amen.