

April 13, 2017

Maundy Thursday

One of the joys of my work is giving communion. And as I was preparing for tonight I thought about Emily, a woman, a pillar of church at my last appointment. I remember Emily at her 100th birthday party when she asked me to come to her home and give her and her family communion. So, I went and blessed the elements and we took communion together. And when we were done, and talking alone she started to reminisce with me about how many times she has taken communion in her life. And eventually we stopped counting and figured out it had been in the thousands. And so I asked her, did it ever become a boring ritual and she emphatically said, "never". And so asked what did it mean to take it all those times. And she thought for a bit, and then said, "Togetherness." And I thought what a sweet thing, and then she said, "because being together is hard. When you go to the same church for 100 years you don't always like everybody there, but when you take communion, it doesn't matter. It's not about you, it's about God - you are together, you're a family, your connected. I've always liked that the most and I always feel better after communion. After I got to spend some time with God I see everything and everyone differently."

So, I thought about Emily and what it means tonight for us to be together, to be connected, joined through this act and our faith to something larger than ourselves. To take time to spend with God and live out the scripture - "For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are retelling the message of the Lord's death, that he died for you. Do this until he comes again." So, what are we to remember? That this meal is a link and a connection between this world and another 2,000 years ago when Jesus gathered in the upper room of Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. That meal which, for the Hebrew people, symbolizes their freedom from oppression and slavery. That meal which Jesus through the bread and cup, through the giving of his body and blood, gives us today freedom from sin and brokenness to new life. For in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, we remember and experience the presence of Christ, who walks with us, suffers and died for us.

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

And we remember that this meal points forward to transformation.

Once there was a family, torn apart by conflict that sought out the services of a therapist. Even in the therapist's office, they kept sniping at one another. The father was distant, the mother complained of how she got no respect, the teenage son slouched moodily in a chair and the young daughter dissolved into tears every time the others raised their voices.

Despairing of making any headway with this dysfunctional bunch, the therapist decided on a simple intervention. "I have just one prescription for you," she said. "I want you all to sit down together every night and eat dinner together. Nobody rushes out. You all stay at the table until everyone is finished. And I want you to start the meal by holding hands around the table and saying grace."

"We're too busy," said the father. "I hate cooking dinner," complained the mother.

"I'm afraid to," objected the daughter. "We'll just fight."

Skeptical as they were, the family agreed to give it a try. On the return visit, the therapist began by asking how things were going. To everyone's surprise, the sullen teenage son spoke up first. Still looking down at the carpet, but with an unfamiliar smile on his face, he replied: "This is the best thing we've ever done. Now, at least I know I am with my dad once a day and know he will at least see me and get to know who I am."

This family learned an important lesson – that change happens when we take time to be together, to truly see one another, care about another. Every time we gather for communion we allow the doorway to open for just such a transformation to happen, as we allow the kingdom of God's grace and hope to break into our hearts and world.

And we remember that that this meal points us inward as a call to self-examination. As part of this act, we are called to look within ourselves and confess everything. Confess how we have hurt ourselves and others. Confess our sins. Admit honestly our temptations, our weaknesses, and need for help. That we can't and don't want to live our lives by ourselves relying only on our strength, and so we come to rely on God's forgiveness.

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For this time also points us upward. In this act and time of communion we need to remember the many blessings we have. This sacrament – this time where God's love is made real - is our time to focus on something bigger than ourselves. To come with our hands lifted up to give our thanks and praise.

So that finally, we come to remember that this meal point us outward to the world. As Jesus got up from the table to wash the feet of his disciples, so we are to ask, "Whose feet, whose heart, whose hand should I be holding, caring for and showing what God's love is really about." For Jesus says to us, "Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another."

And so tonight we're together, we're a family, and we're connected as we spend this time with one another and with God. We come tonight thankful for this time of communion that points us backward to freedom, forward to transformation, upward to thanksgiving, inward to forgiveness, and outward to service- as we come to eat of the bread of life and partake of the cup of joy. As we remember again and again and again how much God loves us and will never let us go. Amen.