

St. Andrew's Cathedral
Jackson, Mississippi
Sermon for September 10, 2017 ~ Proper 18A
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Psychologists tell us that people tend to remember the beginning and end of things better than what happens in between. That is probably why we mark beginnings and endings with rituals and ceremonies. The rituals may be jubilant or somber, but they draw us together in community around significant moments and act as a kind of preservative in the days and years ahead.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the record of how God instructed Moses and Aaron to tell the Israelite slaves in Egypt to prepare a ceremonial meal. It was the first Passover. It was the last meal they would eat before leaving their life of slavery. They were also instructed to make it an annual feast to commemorate how God liberated them with a mighty hand. It marked the end of one way of life and the beginning of a new one. It marked the beginning of a transition.

From that day on, to participate in the ritual would be to remember and become a part of the story it celebrates. In that story, God promised to set the slaves free. What were they to do in anticipation of that freedom? They were to gather together and eat a *particular* meal. In doing so they acknowledged and celebrated both who they were and who their God was. The continuation of that meal would sustain their awareness that their God is the one who dwells in the midst of his people, sets people free, and makes them his own. The Passover celebration thus binds the people together in community and to their God. It was, and still is, a covenant meal between God and God's own people.

It was at a Passover meal in Jerusalem that Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. There with his disciples he related the old, old story of deliverance. But this time, he gave new meaning to things. The unleavened bread is his body broken, the cup of wine is his blood, shed to set people free from slavery to sin and death. And he is the spotless Lamb of God whose sacrifice is sufficient to take away the sin of the world - for all people, for all time!

When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we celebrate and remember anew not only how God liberated God's own people from slavery in Egypt but also how God in Christ liberated us. This kind of "remembering" is not simply recalling information about some things that happened to some people long ago. It is a kind of remembering in which we find ourselves in the story. The past reaches out and touches the present and transforms it. Like the ancient Israelites, we gather together as a family to eat a particular meal. And, in so doing, we acknowledge and celebrate both who we are and who God is. Our God is the One who dwells in our midst, sets people free, and makes them his own! The Eucharistic feast, like the Passover celebration, binds us in covenant to one another and to our God.

Jesus loved to eat and drink. Meals were often the setting for important moments in his life and ministry. He told parables that involved meals. A meal is a time of sharing and sharing his divine life is central to the mission of the Master. When we gather around this table, he is our host. We come at his bidding. We bring our corporate story as a faith community as well as our individual stories and we join them with the story we pray in the Great Thanksgiving. And when we rise, by the mysterious, living presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and the action of God's grace, we discover that *that story* has transformed ours. It is a time of new beginnings. Our loins are girded, our sandals are on our feet, and our staff is in our hand. We have been liberated from slavery to things that keep us from abundant living and set free to go on with the journey toward our own salvation in the beloved community.

Throughout history, life has been lived in the context of communities of one sort or another. Judaism and Christianity are inherently and necessarily corporate expressions of faith. Living in community is not always easy. We read in the record of the past and see in the news of our day that humans have great difficulty getting along with one another.

We are taught not give in to the dark side; we make no peace with the powers that divide community and isolate individuals. Further, our faith and commitment presses us to develop the best side of our lives as social creatures. Today's other readings also provide guidance regarding how we are to conduct ourselves during our journey. For example, we strive to follow the important teaching of Jesus that one who has a problem with another must make every effort to resolve the problem directly and personally before involving others. And, we constantly remind one another that both Jesus and St. Paul taught that the entire law is summed up in the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." It is so important that we keep the community of faith healthy and that we be accountable to one another, watching over one another in love. In that way, the community and its members are transformed. And, what is more, love for our neighbors within the household of God, prepares us for loving our neighbors beyond.

So, how we as Christians love our neighbors in the path of and in the aftermath of storms such as Harvey and Irma, how we love our neighbors who are immigrants, how we love our LGBTQ neighbors, how we love our neighbors who are homeless, hungry, mentally ill, and any number of other marginalized and vulnerable neighbors authenticates what we proclaim with our lips. At this Table, we receive the Sacrament to nourish us to be sent out to be a sacrament in the world at our doorstep.

Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." If any group of us will gather, work, act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, with God's Spirit intentionally a part of what we do, we become much more than simply the collective number of people we are. Two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three. The sum of our individual ideas and resources and abilities becomes much more because of the synergy that God's presence provides.

We do gather in Jesus' name. We re-call him to be present with us. Like the Passover Seder, the Eucharist isn't celebrated alone. Our presence in the corporate celebration contributes in ways beyond our knowing to the stability and courage of each of us and of all of us. The faith of the one needs the nourishment of the faith of others, just as the faith of the community requires the faith of the one.

The New Testament Greek word for Church is *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly." The first thing Jesus did when he began his public ministry was to call others into community. The Christian faith was born in the context of community and is Christian only in the continuation of that corporate reality we call the Church. Jesus makes it clear how important we are one to another on this journey from slavery to freedom. Through our link to one another in Christ, there is a power in our community, uniting the values of God to our values on earth. This is how Jesus enables us to use God's power for making healing and life-giving love more effective among God's people. We come together, we stay together, we work together in our Savior's name, bringing to focus the presence of God and unleashing the power of the Spirit to transform our lives and the lives of all God's children. And wherever authentic Christian community exists, others are attracted to it and included in it.

When we depart from our assembly, our oneness continues through our consciousness of the bonds and the mission we share. We are sent into the world in the name of the Risen Christ and wherever we are, the power and the glory of God bursts forth into the world through the lives of believers.