

A DINNER TO MOURN OR TO CELEBRATE?

Luke 22: 7-20; 24: 13-35

Yesterday, we held a memorial service for a long time member of this congregation – Margaret Laidlaw. We call it a memorial service when there is a gap of time between the death of a person and the service itself. But why do we call it a celebration of life? Is the tone of celebration a way of avoiding the grief and sorrow of the loss? Is it a way of distancing from more difficult emotions? Does the emphasis on celebration make the service more superficial, especially if the death was untimely, the suffering prolonged, and the pressure to be more upbeat just causing people to feel that much more alone in their pain rather than comforted through it?

Well, each and every situation must be treated as unique. In the death of one who has lived a full life and with a legacy of love left to those still alive, a funeral service can truly be a celebration. But in situations where the circumstances of death are not easy or straightforward and where there has been conflict and hurt for those left behind, celebrating something good in a life while also acknowledging the pain and hurt before God is an important balance to achieve.

So where does Jesus' death fit into this mix? Our scripture readings offer us a before and after celebration of Holy Communion. We call it a celebration because it is a meal shared among friends. The commemoration of the Passover for the Jewish people is a celebration of their freedom from tyranny and slavery. And certainly, in Jesus' day, such a celebration was also a revolutionary act of resistance given that the Jewish people were under Roman occupation and a corrupt leadership beholden to their Roman overlords. To celebrate a Passover victory over colonial occupiers, be they Egypt, Babylon or Rome is truly revolutionary if it leads to agitation and resistance in whatever ways that's possible.

But Jesus also reframes the meaning of the meal he is sharing with his closest followers. It is certainly a Passover meal, but it is also about his impending death. In fact, our two readings offer us a before and after. The first reading, which is the institution of the Lord's supper also called a last supper, has an ominous tone about it. Jesus is telling them that he will be killed like a lamb is slaughtered as part of the Passover celebration. But his death has a tragic element to it. He is being killed because those in power see Jesus as a threat. His influence among the

people is building the kind of resistance those in power are afraid of. When people begin to feel hope for a better day and a better way, they begin to agitate for change. Their courage in protest increases and they resist being stuck in a state of paralyzing fear and slavish obedience.

And Jesus is particularly threatening because the resistance, agitation and hope he is inspiring is not driven by hate, but by faith in the power of love. By building up relationships of healing love, he is encouraging a different kind of kingdom than one where those in power rule by threatening, enslaving and dividing people. If people want to come together and build trust with each other and care for one another in a common cause, isn't that a threat? Think about how Ukrainians have come together against the massive onslaught of a colonial tyrant, and how that is turning the tide of the struggle. Think about protest movements like those in Iran. When people come together for common cause in the name of love and justice, those in power are deeply threatened.

But Jesus, on his part, knows that he himself will be arrested, tortured and killed publicly, to make an example of him, in order to intimidate and crush any rising tide of agitation and hope. What will his path be now that death will come? Well, he frames his death as an act of love, and he promises that love will win. Love doesn't cave in to fear, nor does it capitulate to hate. Rather, true love entrusts itself to a larger power who will keep raising it up even when it is repeatedly crushed by a world where violent force is the preferred weapon.

But will this work? Jesus is trying to tell his followers that they must keep sharing this meal, and each time they do, they must celebrate his death, because hidden in his death is the victory of love, a love that neither runs away, caves in to defeat or gives up faith and hope that it will win some way, some day among those who embrace it. Love will win.

But can Jesus' followers believe this? Can we? Do we? Do we believe that love ultimately wins? Do we feel ourselves transformed by love over and over again as we live our lives and pass through challenges? Do we feel God's transforming love in Jesus entering us every time we take the bread and wine that represent his life?

Well, if we are honest, we must admit that it is hard sometimes isn't it? Life can be exhilarating and joyful, but it can also be discouraging and sad. We can't guarantee that every time we celebrate Holy Communion we will feel like celebrating much of anything. It may not be a particularly celebratory season in our lives. But we're in good company in that regard, because the way the story is told in the gospels, the disciples cave in to their fear, distress,

bewilderment and grief before there is any hint they may rise up anew with faith, hope and love.

Consider our second story which comes after Jesus' suffering and death. Two disciples are leaving Jerusalem after witnessing the horror of it all. Jesus' death is also the death of their hopes and dreams in what was possible. They are totally swallowed up in their trauma and are talking about it as they make their way back home. But suddenly, it seems, there is a stranger who joins them. They don't recognize him. How could they? They just witnessed Jesus horrifically brutalized and killed, and so whatever this fellow may have looked like he could definitely not be Jesus! And besides. To recognize Jesus, their spirits would have to be in a very different state of being than their current shock and despair.

And yet, what happens? By feigning ignorance, the stranger invites them to tell him why they are so sad and bewildered. But then, he challenges their interpretation of what it all means. Did Jesus not tell them that he would die, but that like bread and wine shared in a meal that nourishes love and new life, his death would become seeds of new life for all who put their faith and hope in his revolutionary love? And didn't the scriptures they heard read every sabbath not speak about the suffering of goodness, the rise of injustice and the crushing of love by world powers seeking to overturn God's saving intentions for the world?

What happened to Jesus was a finale in a long story of God challenging demonic and worldly powers bent on destroying God's saving intentions. But they would not succeed. For love, eternal love, love who is God revealed and embodied in God's messiah, would rise up over and over again to declare a big no to hate and indifference, and a big yes to people coming together to care for one another and their mother earth.

Well, maybe Jesus put it in different words for the two disciples on the road that day, but maybe it wasn't all that different in substance. How do we know? Because what happens next? They invite the stranger to stay with them as it is getting late. They extend hospitality to him. They prepare a meal to share with him. The seeds of love are shared over a meal, despite the sadness, the grief and the trauma of what they witnessed over the last week. And what happens? As Jesus, being the guest, is invited to break the bread and offer a blessing, they remember! They see! The last supper is now a new supper with Jesus among them in a whole new way! The supper that was tinged with sense of impending doom is now infused with fresh hope, joy and celebration, for Jesus is alive! He is risen! Love incarnate is not dead. It is even more alive now, and it is shared once again in a meal with bread and wine. Wow!

But here's the thing. As soon as they recognize it is Jesus sharing a meal with them, we're told, "he vanished from their sight." But rather than his physical disappearance making them sad, they say this to each other: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" The truth of what Jesus was telling them, about the suffering of God's messiah, about the crushing of Love incarnate, but also, how such Love that is of God and is God must rise up again stronger and deeper than ever, is a powerful master story... if, we can believe it as true! To believe that true love cannot ultimately die, that it must ultimately win, is a belief worth celebrating. But to get to the celebrating, we must also face the grief and sadness which also comes from loving in a world where there is cruel suffering and death.

And so, every time we celebrate Holy Communion, there must be an element of celebration in it, even as we mark Jesus' death and the terrible reality that evil and injustice are everywhere present in our world. The celebration is in the power of love to move through and create new life in us as we take Christ in with bread and wine. There is always hope when people come together to share love through hospitality, fellowship and food, care for one another and take care into the world. Even as each of us will pass through difficult times of loss and other things besides, imagine how powerful it can be that we can come together and take the life of Christ into us. Imagine what we can offer others in a world of pain and suffering when we are made alive through the life of Christ in us.

So then, let us together partake of the Lord's supper, and may the experience become for each of us personally and together a most holy communion. Amen.