

“And They Recognized Him...”

April 6, 2008

Luke:13-35

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This is a day of celebration. It is always a joy to witness a family's love and devotion to their child as they bring her or him for baptism. Children remind us of God's affirmation of the future. They give us hope and hope is indeed a reason to celebrate. Within every child we bear witness to the past, the heritage of a family, the present community of family and friends and the future yet unknown.

Our gospel reading today also bears witness to the past, present, and future. On the road to Emmaus we get to overhear a conversation about traumatic and life altering events that have just occurred. The two disciples walking on the road talk about Jesus, his time with them, his journey to Jerusalem where he was crucified. They contemplate what it all meant. They talked about events in their recent past that have brought them to this present time of crisis in their life. It's Easter evening, and the disturbing news is that the women who went to the tomb where Jesus was buried have found it to be empty. And then, a stranger joins them on the Emmaus road. He asks them what they are talking about. Is this man crazy! Is this the only person who hasn't heard the news, picked up a newspaper, turned on the TV in the last 3 days? The disciples are dumbfounded that anyone should not know that Jesus was crucified and that now his body is missing.

But then it's the stranger's turn to talk, and he says it all makes sense to him. He reminds them of their own religious history and scripture. If this man was the Messiah, it's to be expected that all this would happen. The stranger joins the past with the present, but not just the past of the prior 3 days, the past of God's great drama in history, God's journeying with God's people from long ago up to this *kairos* moment. This *kairos* moment opens up a new beginning.

As the three reach their destination, the stranger keeps on walking but the disciples, in the tradition of hospitality, demand that he join them for supper. Meals had real importance back then; they were an act of welcome. Table fellowship meant "you're welcome here." It was also an act of salvation for travelers. There were no McDonalds or Days Inns were just around the bend. So in and through this saving act of offering food to the traveler, they themselves receive salvation. They understand!! His voice sounded familiar to them; they remember their hearts burning while they listened to him speak on the road, and now as he breaks the bread, blesses it, and shares it, their eyes are opened and they recognize him. And then he disappears. The past and present conflate; and the future opens up.

We humans are people of rituals; they help us assign transcendent meanings to ordinary life. Many of our rituals involve meals or food. We'll have a special cake to celebrate Melanie Elizabeth, and her mom, Rachel's 30th birthday following worship. And you're invited to the party! In our home, certain foods are expected at certain ritual meals, and I am in trouble if I don't prepare them. It just isn't Christmas without green bean casserole, strawberry pretzel salad, and peanut butter fudge. Why it isn't Christmas without these and other foods is not exactly explainable. There is a transcendent meaning assigned them.

Two weeks from tonight Christina, Tom, and I will prepare a Passover Seder for the youth in order to share a little of the Judeo part of their Judeo-Christian heritage with them. Each food in the Seder has meaning. I was reviewing the materials this week and my attention was drawn to the 4 glasses of wine served. (Don't worry, we won't be serving wine to the youth.) I asked Tom (with his knowledge of Hebrew) to help me recreate a small part of the Seder meal.

The first glass of wine is a glass lifted to freedom because the Seder celebrates God's freeing the Hebrew people from Egypt. Something like this is said: ***May this cup be a symbol of joy as we celebrate this festival of Passover. On this night long ago our ancestors heard the call of freedom, challenging them to leave slavery behind and face the unknown before them. Tonight that call rings out again, commanding us to champion the cause of all the oppressed. We drink this wine now in gratitude for the freedom to celebrate this festival together and we say...Bar-UCH ah-TAH A-doe-NAI, el-lo HAY-noo MEL-lech ha-o-LAHM, bo-RAY pa-REE ha-GAH-fen. Blessed are you, my Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.(We give thanks to God for the nurturing spirit that brings forth the fruit of the earth and enables us to drink this wine in freedom.)***

The second glass of wine is to history. With this glass, Jews recall the story of the Exodus bringing that event to relevancy in the present. As the 10 plagues that the Egyptians experienced are recalled, people around the table are invited to name some of the plagues that torment us today. They say: ***Bar-UCH ah-TAH A-doe-NAI, el-lo-HAY-noo MEL-lech ha-o-LAHM, bo-RAY pa-REE ha-GAH-fen. Blessed are you, my Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine. (We give thanks to God for the inspiration that brings us to this table, to drink this wine in remembrance of our past.)***

The third glass of wine is to community. It is raised to celebrate community in all its diversity. It notes the importance and strength of hands joining hands and hearts joining hearts. They say: ***Bar-UCH ah-TAH A-doe-NAI, el-lo HAY-noo MEL-lech ha-o-LAHM, bo-RAY pa-REE ha-GAH-fen. Blessed are you, my Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine. (We give thanks to God for blessing us with love, as we dedicate this glass of wine to friendship and community.)***

Finally, the fourth glass of wine is to the future. A child is sent to open the front door to symbolize the welcoming of a future time of peace, justice, and freedom. ***Bar-UCH ah-TAH A-doe-NAI, el-lo HAY-noo MEL-lech ha-o-LAHM, bo-RAY pa-REE ha-GAH-fen. (Blessed are you, my Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.)***

At the Seder table a place is set and a chair left empty for the prophet Elijah who is believed to come as a messenger of the Messiah. But the empty chair also is a reminder of all those not present but who are still remembered and named and remain a part of the struggles and joys of life.

The rabbis spoke of how to explain this ritual meal to the child who is too young to ask. This is what they said: ***To this child we say: "this wondrous evening happens every Spring so that we may remember how, out of death and sorrow and slavery came life and joy and freedom. To remember the sorrow we eat bitter herbs; to remember the joy we drink sweet wine. Together we sing of life and we pray that you may grow to live in peace and justice.***

Today as Christians who share in Holy Communion we bring our past Judeo religious heritage to the present and we look to the future with what we might call our fifth cup, the cup of the Christ covenant. By doing so, like those who traveled that first Emmaus road and broke bread with Christ long ago, we seek to recognize him in our midst, in each other, and in all God's creation.

And to the child too young to ask, to Melanie Elizabeth, we say ***"this wondrous meal happens so that we may remember how out of death and sorrow come life and joy and freedom. Together we sing of life lived in the Spirit of the risen Christ and we pray that you may grow to live in peace, in justice, and in the liberation known in and through the love of God."***

