

"Unfinished Business"

"Day of Deliverance"

Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 26:1-5

From time to time I receive information that helps me in the work I do as your pastor. More specifically this morning, I mention this in terms of the administration of the Sacrament known variously as the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and the Eucharist, etc. There seems little that Covid-19 hasn't adversely affected; the Eucharist is no exception.

However, let me offer a qualification. No disease or condition set by man can in any way alter the efficaciousness of the Sacrament. Please pardon my use of such an unusual and lesser-known word as "efficaciousness". In essence, it means "effectiveness". In the present context it has to do with the divine nature of the Eucharist and the ultimate effect it has in terms of God's purpose for it. The Scriptures teach us that there is some inherent power and quality to the Lord's Supper that exists in the Sacrament that is alive, true, and fully and perfectly effective in the heart and life of the receiver who receives it in faith. Even though we don't fully and completely know "how" the Sacrament works God's divine purpose and will in the heart, mind, and life of the believer who receives it properly (and we cannot fully or completely know how), God has promised that somehow God's will and purpose will be enacted in the grateful recipient, however imperfectly we understand it and however imperfectly grateful we are. The single point here is that God is the one who makes the Eucharist effective, not the manner in which we receive it nor in terms of the manner in which the officiant administers it.

In case you are wondering why I begin my sermon in this manner, let me explain what came to my attention week before last.

It was recently noted to one of our Elders that the way we presently are doing Communion is lacking in one respect. I want us to think about the order and process of our traditional process. After an opening prayer, followed by the words of institution I hand the trays with the bread to our serving Elders whereupon they begin distributing the bread. Perhaps we've never given it much thought but there is a bit of time consumption involved here. Though the duration isn't very long, due to the small size of our sanctuary and congregation, that brief moment or two wherein the elements are distributed are actually more important and functional than perhaps we have ever given conscious thought to. It is precisely the same for the brief moment or two during which the Communion trays with the grape juice are distributed. Those brief moments are, at the very least, important to some worshipers. To some, it is becoming apparent, those brief moments might even be considered to be critical. For some, those brief moments are critical in that this is time to quietly and solemnly reflect on the nature and the meaning of the Eucharist. Indeed, it is anticipated that worshipers will want to use those quiet moments thinking about Jesus, about how greatly he loves us, and how great was the cost to him to save us from ourselves and a broken and corrupt world. It is anticipated that worshipers will want to use those moments to consider our own personal context, the nature of our past and present life, and indeed the nature of the life we have yet to live.

You see, each time we accept the invitation to sit at table and eat from this life-giving table we are making a public statement and making a public declaration that we are committed to continue on loving and serving Jesus. We are making a public statement that we are sinners, unworthy sinners at that, but who nonetheless will strive on, undeterred toward the prize that awaits us (a reference to 1 Corinthians 9, Philippians 3, and Colossians 2). It may be said that when we take the bread in hand and then the cup to our lips we are making a solemn oath unequalled by any oath a human being can make.

But it is not only a solemn oath in the sense of it being solemn and eternally serious. It also is an oath of joy and heartfelt expectation of the future blessings of God as intimated in the Sacrament, intimated in terms of the present life and the eternal life to come. I couldn't help but think of 2 Cor 2:14-16 which says, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (NIV)

You may remember that from time to time back when we were receiving Communion the traditional way I suggested that as we held the bread or juice in our hand, particularly in terms of the juice, that we use our physical senses to assess what we were holding. As our olfactories take in the sweet and slightly acidic odor of the juice perhaps we are reminded of the sweetness of Jesus but also of the acidic nature of what he suffered to pay for our sins. The color is to remind us of his blood, the payment rendered on our account. That grape juice as a liquid reminds us of his blood which flowed from his body down that horrific tree into the rocky soil of Golgotha. His blood could not in any traditional or ordinary way be put back in his body. But his body was restored in a manner of which we simply cannot understand. Likewise, how we are restored to right relationship with God is in some ultimate sense kind of a mystery. Scholars the world over offer various theories of atonement, all of which supply part of the answer but none of which are entirely definitive and fully sufficient. As it was related to me that some folks find this time of reflection missing in our Covid-19 constrained manner of receiving the Eucharist, I realize that this observation was as astute as it was informative.

This is why we have altered our manner in receiving the Lord's Supper slightly. After the prayer and words of institution, at my prompt to our musician, we will have the duration of one verse of a Communion hymn immediately before we actually consume each element for the purposes of which I have just laid out for us.

I drafted our first sermon title "Unfinished Business" for two reasons. First, it is because if we simply and hurriedly receive the elements of Communion without being afforded the time of which I spoke, then we have some unfinished business to tend to. Even though the time is brief, please use it as God's gift and benefit to you.

And second, "Unfinished Business" refers to something alluded to in our Gospel lesson. Researching the story of the first Communion service - though it

was the Passover service for Jesus and his disciples - I discovered a passage I'd never preached on before. I realized that our Gospel lesson is not only a passage that is usually considered of great importance, at least in terms of the more commonly used and preferred texts, but it also presents us with a bit of encouragement in terms of our response to the love of God in Christ Jesus. When we have eaten the bread and drank from the cup and concluded our worship service, it is not true that, "Well, worship is over. It's time for some post-service fellowship and then we can go home. Our Sunday morning's worship and ritual are over." Things, my brothers and sisters, are not over. We all have some unfinished business to tend to. Let me read Matthew 26:1-2 first and then 3-5: "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, the Passover is two days away-- and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." At that point in Jesus' life, even as he pointed his disciples to the greatest sacrifice in all human history, till then and since, Jesus intimated that he still had 2 days worth of work and service to complete.

We know virtually nothing of what consumed Jesus' time and ministry of those 2 remaining days. If we read on in chapter 26, about all we know is 1) the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with her perfume (at which Jesus' disciples became very indignant and railed at her terrible waste), and 2) the story of Judas agreeing to betray Jesus. What was the content of those two days before Jesus broke bread and shared the cup with his chosen disciples? We really don't have many clues. But there was ministry that happened before he died.

Before we die our earthly death, we, too, have unfinished business to tend to. Now just what that unfinished business is, that is the question, is it not? It is for us to figure out. Administration and reception of the Eucharist was never ever meant to be a stand alone ritual, a complete end in itself. It was meant to be, and is, preparation for the unfinished business we have to do during the days of our live we have yet to live.

Verses 3-5: "Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or there may be a riot among the people." (NIV)

Consider now that these were the religious elites of the religious community. For the briefest of moments I would like you to look for a bit of humor in this text, but only for a very brief moment, and that before our hearts shudder in repulsion and disbelief. The text tells us quite plainly that the elders of the people, the chief priests, and indeed, the high priest plotted to arrest Jesus "in some sly way" that they could kill him. [animatedly now] "But not during the Feast," they said - as if it was totally wrong during their high season religious feast but it was perfectly acceptable at any other time. [animatedly again] "But not during the Feast!" This is one of those instances that is heart-breakingly funny because it is so heart-breakingly tragic and, well, heart-breaking.

We do well to look at the specific reason the Jewish leaders won't agree to try and arrest him during the Feast - they didn't want to start a riot among the

people. What kind of a reason is that?! Again, another point that is tragically humorous.

But even here, the ultimate goal is not to dispirit; the ultimate goal is not to discourage, or to even allow despair. Jesus would come back to his disciples after his resurrection to not only show them he was indeed alive again but to give them reassurance that he had fully and perfectly forgiven them. He came to them to give them their marching orders, as we would say. The day of deliverance, in terms of our Gospel lesson, was 2 days yet in the future. And yet it would come as surely as the sun comes up each morning.

The story is told of a Easter morning preacher who, though the sky was thick with clouds that particular Easter morning, focused on the truth of Jesus resurrection and the promise of forgiveness as sure of the truth of the sun rising every day. One slightly smart alec, but otherwise good natured, kid, after the service had ended, greeted the pastor on the way out but who playfully pointed out that clouds covered the sky and the fog was as thick as the hairs on a dog's back. To this, the pastor, knowing well the youth's typical playfulness, simply smiled and noted, "Ah, tis true! But above the clouds the sun is shining no less brightly than yesterday or that which will happen tomorrow, and this fog will burn off shortly." Together they laughed at the playfulness of which a pastor and youth can, and perhaps ought to, engage in. There seems to be something of a sweet aroma in such an exchange, is there not?

As a sidebar note, it has been said that there is nothing worse as testimony to the Gospel life than a dour, sour Christian. Thus, if anyone thinks it odd that we find a bit of humor however odd it may seem in what is almost anything but humorous, well, we can simply say we know Jesus and we have shared in his meal. And this leads us to a segue into our OT lesson.

Those who remember having participated in a traditional Jewish or Christian version of the Passover celebration will probably also remember two elements of that celebration. First, we remember the playful part of the ritual where the children playfully hide part of the unleavened bread whereupon the head of household engages in a frantic (but playful) "search" for the missing bread whereupon it is found underneath the pillow. This seemingly insignificant element of the ritual is more significant than many realize. First, it is intended to communicate to the children that they are a very important part of the faith community. Children, by nature, love games, do they not? What better way to communicate love and inclusion than by a brief children's game? Second, it signals to the whole community of faith that God's desire is that we find joy and even humor in the God-given, God-driven life. And this ties into the second element of the Passover celebration I've alluded to.

You will probably remember that traditional and Christian-styled Passover celebrations are engaged in a leisurely pace. Most of them seem to take place over the course of 2-3 hours. The liturgy is interrupted at one point and the family gatherings take time out for a leisurely meal not totally dissimilar to typical family meals where different cultural events, issues, and ideas are discussed. Only then does the family return to the concluding ritual elements.

In one sense this may seem a bit odd for if you remember from our OT lesson God's instructions for the first Passover were the antithesis of that which would follow. Though the first Passover ritual covered the course of the night, there nevertheless is a sense of haste and urgency that clearly colors the over all event. "This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover." (Exodus 12:11 NIV) Even the unleavened bread speaks to the haste and urgency. There is no time to let the dough rise. But that was the original and first Passover. Thereafter in later generations there was no need for haste and a sense of urgency. In fact, it was one of the expected parts of the Passover, from that day onward, that the topics of conversation among the family, including the children (and perhaps especially for the children) were the wonders and marvelous things of God. Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and yes even neighbors (for in small family circumstances they celebrated with their nearby neighbors) were under the charge of teaching the things of God to the next generation so they could and would teach the things of God to the coming generations.

I never dreamed I would be preaching a Passover celebration sermon in the fall, particularly Labor Day weekend. [Typically they are found during Lent.] But our OT lesson is the lectionary passage specified as appropriate for today. And in that the text speaks so eloquently and specifically to what I wanted to bring to our attention - namely, our need to be reminded of the importance of not hurrying through the sacred meal, but to use those small pieces of time to ponder the wonders and miracles of God and all of the blessings that Jesus has bestowed upon us, we who are not worthy in and of ourselves but who have been made worthy by the blood of Jesus voluntarily poured out for us - well, we remember and celebrate the Passover whenever we sit at table and share in the Sacrament.

I am grateful for the reminder that we should not do so in such a hurried manner. It is with all these things in mind that we share in the goodness of the Lord today. Amen.