

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” If you’ve never attended a Passover Seder, then mark your calendars now for next April 9th and find a Jewish friend who will welcome you to her table that night. If you have had this opportunity, then you know that the answer to this question comes not as a catechism, but in the form of a liturgical banquet and the dramatic re-telling of a —the narrative we have been hearing from the first fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus. Today’s Old Testament reading comes from the twelfth chapter of that larger story, and functions something like the rubrics in *The Book of Common Prayer*. (Those words in small italicized font that give instructions on what to do and how to do it and when to do it.) But the heart of the matter is summed up in the fourteenth verse: *“This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”*

Why is this night different? It’s a night for remembering and celebrating. Pesah remembrance, however, is not merely a form of mental gymnastics or nostalgia: it is literally about a process of re-remembering the community. Each new generation of Jews *become* part of this never-ending story of God’s liberating intervention in their lives. All were slaves; all are now free. That is something that is definitely worth celebrating!

Notice that the Israelites are still slaves in Egypt when they celebrate this *first* Passover; suggesting that their gathering is bold act of trust in God. This re-remembering and celebrating *anticipate* the freedom that at this point still remains in the future tense. It’s close to what our opening collect today is getting at: *“Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts...”* Once the Israelites do cross the Red Sea and are given the gift of Torah at Mt. Sinai, one of their core values will be to never forget where they have come from. Their experience as slaves is meant to shape their economy and their politics. Once they worked 24/7, seven days a week; in the Promised Land work will be punctuated with Sabbath rest every seventh day to remind them of just how precarious life can be for “the least of these.” Special care must be given to widows and orphans (and even the foreigners in their midst must be treated with dignity.) Why? *Remember what it was like for you when you were slaves in Egypt...*

So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem on that last week of his life, he does so as a religious pilgrim—as a practicing Jew shaped by this core narrative. He makes arrangements to celebrate *Pesah* on that Holy Thursday with his friends in an upper room. But it would be no an ordinary Passover celebration; it was also to be the last meal they would share together. He was arrested late that same night and executed the next day. So as that Last Supper concludes, Jesus takes the matzo and blesses it and breaks it and gives it. *“This is my Body.”* And then he takes the cup and blesses it and shares it; *“this is my blood.”* It sounds like the end of the story. But three days later, some disciples are on the road to Emmaus when a stranger joins them and when the stranger *takes* the bread and *blesses* it and *breaks* it and *gives* it, their eyes are opened. They remember and celebrate. *He is risen!*

I was raised in a small United Methodist church in northeast Pennsylvania. We celebrated communion once a month in that church and while it always felt very important to me, what we were most clear about when we spoke of its meaning was that we were not Catholics. The words on the Table proclaimed the purpose of our gathering: “do this in remembrance of me.” What was stressed was that Jesus had died for the sins of the world—for *my* sins. Those perfectly

cubed pieces of bread and individual glasses of grape juice were symbols that helped us to remember what happened on “that old rugged cross.”

Now just up the street in my small town, at the Queen of Peace Church, they celebrated mass every single week (and probably every day of the week for that matter.) Like us Protestants, they were also focused on the death of Jesus, but there the sacrifice was being re-enacted every time they gathered for the mass: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* Every time that *Sanctus* bell was rung you knew that it definitely *counted* there; that it was the real deal!

I’m only being a little tongue-in-cheek in both descriptions. Most of us who grew up in the Church tended to grow up on one end or the other of that spectrum. And even among those of us who grew up in the Episcopal Church: some were raised in more Protestant Episcopal congregations (not unlike that Methodist Church where I grew up) while others were raised in more Anglo-Catholic congregations (not that different from Queen of Peace.)

And here we all are! If I passed out a survey today to ask you what happens in a few minutes when we celebrate the Eucharist I bet I’d get a whole spectrum of answers representing that diversity. It is always the most interesting question raised whenever I teach Newcomer classes: Catholics want to know if this is “really real” and Protestants want to make sure we don’t sound *too* Catholic! But the genius (and the curse) of Anglicanism goes back to Cranmer and those earliest editions of the Prayerbook, when Anglicans were debating about this very same question. Some said the *priest* should hand over the host and say: “the Body of Christ, preserve your body and soul unto everlasting life.” Others said that the *minister* should say: “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.” What did Cranmer do? He put those two statements together! And everyone was kind of happy and everyone was kind of disappointed and everyone was a little confused—and Anglicanism was born!

Now I’m fine with that. In fact, I’m more than fine with it. I love the ambiguity and richness of the Episcopal Church with the zeal of a convert. We don’t have to have it all settled, and we have become pretty good over the past five hundred years or so at being a little happy, a little disappointed, and a little confused. This summer’s gathering at Lambeth fits right in with that heritage.

There is another part of our Christian heritage I’ve become more interested in lately, and that is the eastern roots of Christian faith—the Orthodox traditions that took hold in the Church in Greece and Russia and Armenia and Syria and elsewhere. Our debates in the west tend to get stuck on fighting and re-fighting those old Reformation questions, but Orthodoxy looks back to what is sometimes called “the undivided Church,” back to those earliest centuries of the Church’s life before there was Catholic or Protestant or Anglican or Orthodox.

Now that return to the roots of the early Church isn’t without its own challenges. The world has changed a lot since the fourth century! But some would argue that the challenges the Church faces today are much more like the challenges the early Church faced as it tried to offer an alternative vision in the midst of a declining Roman empire than any other period in Church

history. So drawing on that wisdom can be a kind of back-to-the-future way of re-framing old questions with new perspectives. Olivier Clement, an Orthodox theologian whom I have been reading lately, says that “the very being of the Church is Eucharistic.” We gather here and eat this bread and drink this cup to become what we eat. And then he writes this: “*the world was created as an act of celebration, so that it might share in grace and become Eucharist through the offerings of human beings.*” (pg. 110) I just love that because it pushes us even beyond the walls of this place and beyond the gathered community into God’s world to see this meal as a *cosmic* reality. It calls our attention more toward the Incarnation and less about Atonement debates. It calls us toward our mission in the world in ways that have sometimes been downplayed in the theological traditions most of us inherited from the church of our youths. It helps us ask more interesting questions than “is it *really* the Body of Christ?”

Through the Paschal mystery, Jesus has extended Passover to include us. While we should never forget that the flight from Egypt involved people who were fleeing literal political oppression and economic hardship in search of freedom, we also know that there are other kinds of slavery too. Even the most privileged among us know something of what it is like to be enslaved spiritually or psychologically or emotionally. Augustine said that each of us has a God-sized hole within us that can be filled only with God, and we do not rest until we rest in God. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t try to fill that space with so many other things: sex, drugs, exercise, food, work, cars... The interior journey of the soul, from slavery to freedom, can be as arduous as the one made by the Israelites for forty years through the wilderness of Sinai.

Like our Jewish friends at the Seder meal, we gather here week after week in the name of Jesus to remember and to celebrate. We are male and female; young and old; married and single; gay and straight, evangelical and catholic. And because we do not agree on everything, politically or theologically, we sometimes feel a little bit happy, a little bit disappointed and a little confused. But we share in a rich heritage and what binds us together are not our *beliefs*—over time those will continue to change and develop and grow. What binds us together is Jesus Christ: the Bread of Life. What binds us together is that we are one Body with many different members. What binds us together is that like the many grains of wheat that come together in one loaf, and the many grapes that come together into one chalice: we are *becoming* Eucharist. In the process of that re-membering and celebrating we begin to discover the unity we share, not of our own making, but as sheer gift from a generous and loving God.

Ambrose of Milan—one of those looming figures from the early days of the “undivided Church”—said that the Risen Christ is the Bread of Life who gives himself fully to us—so that we might become what we receive for the sake of the world. His words, found on the cover of today’s bulletin, call us to begin this fall season when we commission lay ministers as a people who remember and celebrate that abiding truth:

Go to him and take your fill, for he is the bread of life. Go to him and drink, for he is the spring. Go to him and be enlightened, for he is the light. Go to him and become free, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.