

Hurry... 6 September 2020 – Labour Day

How many of you savour a meal? How many set the table with linens, placemats, use “the good” china, water glasses, silverware, etc.? Candles? Flowers? How many of you make every meal a celebration? An event?

For many of us, when we gather with family and/or friends, it is an event. Whether we go to a restaurant or prepare a meal at home, we tend to savour our food, eat slowly, lingering over courses with no concerns about time.

Not me.

I was raised to eat in a hurry. Not dawdle. When I started working we had 15 minutes for a meal break so I'd eat as fast as possible, most often not tasting the food. I often still do that today. I've been known to eat my breakfast while standing over the sink, sipping tea and eating a piece of toast. Why? I'm really not sure.

I have a beautiful round dining table. I have beautiful round table cloths and table linens. I don't have “good” china. I use the same dishes every day. Occasionally I light a candle and often have fresh flowers on the table. Yet I don't often make a meal for one, an event. And I should. I really, really should.

Our first reading is about preparation. God spoke to Moses and Aaron and instructed them on how the first Passover feast was to happen. Don't worry about the china. Don't worry about the preparation of the lamb. Other than putting blood on the lintels of the door, there's not a lot that has to happen before it is cooked. It must be cooked over the fire, not boiled and prepared ahead of time.

This is a terrifying night that is to happen...don't relax...don't socialize. Prepare the lamb, slaughter it, spread the blood, roast it and eat it. Standing up, coat on, car keys in hand, shoes on. We need to be ready to go. If we do these things God will remember us and we will survive this dreadful night.

The Spirit of God moved over the community and any house that did not have the blood on the lintel would see their firstborn, both human and animal die. Can you imagine the sounds of horror, grief and loss that first Passover? And let us remember, God designed this feast as a perpetual ordinance, an annual event, to ensure that the people of Israel, God's chosen, remembered that horrible night.

My Dad always ate quickly. He learned this when he was in the Royal Air Force. They were given little time to eat, so you ate as quickly as you could. Plus, the rations were not tasty, so you'd eat quickly so as not to taste them as much. It's a habit he was not able to break.

On the odd occasion when we would go out for a meal at a restaurant as a family, my Dad would be finished eating by the time my Mam got my brother and myself organized and began to eat her own meal. This was back in the days when you could smoke in restaurants. Many meals were punctuated with the acrid cigarette smoke as Dad waited, somewhat impatiently, for us to finish our meals.

At school I learned to set the table. And clear the table. I learned how to iron table linens and how to eat a multi-course meal, which fork or spoon to use. To this day I take pride in setting the table.

Paul's letter to the Church in Rome implores them to live honourably. All those commandments can be summarized into "Love your neighbour as yourself" and in doing so, this is the fulfillment of the laws of Moses. Paul goes on to say "Love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law". Paul implores the Romans to remember that as children of God we are called to live in the light. He even likens light to wearing armour to overcome the darkness.

A former Executive Archdeacon used to say "if you cannot shine a light on it, you should not do it in the dark". In scripture, night often symbolised hiding. For example, Nicodemus came to see Jesus under the cover of night because if he'd been seen during the day, his reputation would be drawn into scrutiny.

Many crimes are committed after dark. It is considered brazen to rob someone in the middle of the day.

In Matthew's Gospel today we hear of the way to end a quarrel with an individual. First, go to the person in private and speak to them one on one. If they apologise and change their ways, all shall be forgiven. If, however, they refuse to change their ways; the one who has been offended is to take one or two witnesses with them, to corroborate what the individual and the offender says. If the person refuses to change their ways, even after hearing from one or two other people they are to be cast to the outer darkness, with other tax-collectors and sinners.

This short passage is filled with really great stuff. What you bind on earth will be found in heaven, yet what is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven. In other words, if you speak out against something (binding) on Earth, it shall also be forbidden in Heaven. And if you speak out in favour of something (loosing) on Earth, it shall also find favour in Heaven.

We have been in a state of binding and loosing for the past six months. We listen to the provincial, state and national authorities. We listen to the Denominational authorities about what we are to do and how we are to do it.

And just when we think we have it all figured out, something changes, and we are back to square one.

I believe it would be safe to say that a modern, current parable of what Jesus is saying, would go something like this...

If a member refuses to wear a mask and use hand sanitizer, they shall be informed by the Greeter, Elder or Warden. If they continue to refuse, they shall be informed by the Minister or Priest. If they continue to refuse, they shall be told they are unable to attend the Worship Space. Those who wear masks and use hand sanitizer shall find their place in heaven cleaned, healthy and disinfected. Or something like that. :-)

Jesus goes on to say, "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

I find myself asked more and more frequently what has taken us so long in getting our doors open for parishioners and guests. I have responded, repeatedly, that the majority of our Parish Family is in the "vulnerable" age group and we are moving slowly to ensure every safety precaution is in place. I read today of a Church outside Toronto that had been having Prayer Gatherings in the building and there are 14 cases of COVID-19 linked to their gatherings.

The article went on to say that the Church authorities will begin contact tracing, keeping physical distance and observing proper hand hygiene. The way that was worded makes me think that they were not doing so before.

COVID-19 is a serious disease. So I need assurance that we have done everything we can do to keep our people as safe as possible.

I don't want us to feel we are standing, staff in hand, eating as quickly as we can because the Passover is coming. I want us to be fully prepared, "blood on the lintel" prepared as we open the doors. Cautious, yes. Careful, yes. Frantic, no.

The protocols have been written and will be adhered to. The reports have been filed with the Denominational authorities and we wait for permission. Then we will move slowly and cautiously into re-opening. Keeping an ear on the authorities and an eye on the community.

We will be living with COVID-19 for a very long time. It's been six months. It's been a long time. Yet we are not finished yet.

And rather than feel fear, I want us to feel hope. That where two or three gather, Christ is in the midst of us. When we are sanitizing surfaces and disinfecting pens, Christ is there. When we are Worshipping while gazing at a screen, Christ is surrounding us, remind us of who we are and whose we are.

There is a reason we have been singing "Don't be Afraid" every Sunday for the past six months. It is to remind us that God's love is stronger than our fear. It is to remind us that God is never far away. God is only as far away as the tips of our fingers. God surrounds us with love in the midst of fear.

Don't be afraid, God's love is stronger. God's love is stronger than our fear.
Don't be afraid, God's love is stronger, and God has promised to be always near.

It doesn't get much better than that.

Thanks be to God.

Exodus 12.1-14 Romans 13.8-14 Matthew 18.15-20
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