

# North Kildonan United Church

6<sup>th</sup> September 2020 – Rev. Don Johnson

*Exodus 12: 1-14*

**"A Day of Remembrance"**

*Matthew 18: 15-20*

*Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.*

*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.*

Exodus 12:14

Recently a friend and I met for lunch. For years we would go to the same restaurant, located in one of the hotels in my neck of the woods. This restaurant had a few important things going for it. First of all, lots of parking. Secondly, they had a reasonably priced, good quality buffet, which for those of us over 55, came with a 10% discount. What's not to like?

Well, this lunch was the first time we had been together since CoVID barged its way into everyone's life. We decided to go to our usual haunt.

The parking was still plentiful – in fact there was barely a car in the lot. But the usually bustling restaurant was eerily quiet. The buffet counter was shrouded in white tablecloths, almost like a scene from a movie about some long abandoned Victorian mansion. Most of the tables were gone and the menu presented to us was but a shadow of its former glory. The fresh fruits and vegetables and salads and two kinds of soup, cream or broth, all gone and replaced by a less than appetizing list of basically deep fried items or burgers.

So we ordered off the menu and settled into the real reason we were there, which was to get caught up with one another. Very quickly we forgot about those wonderful lunch offerings once available and we began our visit.

There is something about sharing a meal with others that allows us to connect on a deeper and more profound level. This is even more true if there are certain rituals or practices or items involved with the meal.

Think of a family Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner. Perhaps special plates or table ornaments are brought out, only used for that annual meal. Or certain dishes that must be present on the table. One year I tried a recipe for a mushroom loaf that I thought might be an interesting addition for the family Christmas dinner. Every year since then I'm required to make Uncle Don's famous mushroom loaf and every year just before Christmas, when the grocery stores are the busiest, I'm in search of fresh mushrooms.

Guess it's all a part of the fun of Christmas, though it usually doesn't feel like at the time.

The food is important, of course, but so is the unspoken meaning of the dinner. That Christmas dinner may just be the only time in the year when all of the family gather together, and regardless of how good the food was, the memory of assembling the generations of the family under one roof is the lasting blessing.

In our reading from Exodus we hear of a special meal, with a description of how the food was to be prepared and served and how it was to be eaten. This was a meal never to be forgotten. But first, a bit of background.

Last week we heard how Moses had been called and commissioned by God to lead the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt and into a new and free land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God directs Moses to return to Egypt from Midian, to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Israelites. As we hear in the words of the old spiritual:

*When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
let my people go,  
oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.  
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,  
tell old Pharaoh: let my people go.*

Pharaoh knows a good thing when he has it so he's in no hurry to release the Hebrew slaves. And since Pharaoh neither knows nor cares about the God of the Israelites, he increases his mistreatment of God's people.

But the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Almighty who is in covenant with Israel, does not abandon his people to the whims of Pharaoh. God speaks to Moses and tells him to say to the people: *"I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."* (Exodus 6:6-8) At this point the Israelites are so demoralized that they can't hear this as good news, but God is determined to rescue his people.

To persuade the Egyptians, God unleashes various plagues on the Egyptian people, all to no avail. Finally, God decides to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian people and the firstborn of their livestock, but the Israelites will be spared. The sign of salvation for the Israelites is the blood they are commanded to place on their doorposts and lintels. The angel of death that takes the Egyptian firstborn will pass over those homes with the blood marks. There will be such a calamity in Egypt that the Israelites will need to flee for their lives, hence the instructions to hurriedly eat the roasted lamb with sandals on and ready for the road. There will be no time for bread dough to rise so the people will

eat unleavened bread, and they will eat their meal with bitter herbs, a remembrance of the slavery they are about to leave behind.

Ever since, generation after generation have kept the Passover, the feast of freedom for the Jewish people. At a Passover meal, a Seder, the family gathers around the dining room table, a table that holds unleavened bread, bitter herbs, roasted lamb; key foods that echo the origins of the feast. As a part of the ritual and the remembrance, a child asks the elders seated around the table: *"Why is this night special above all other nights?"* The father answers by telling yet again the ancient story of Israel's deliverance: *"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed be he, had not brought our forefathers forth from Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would still be Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt...And the more one tells the story of the departure from Egypt, the more praiseworthy he is."*

It's tempting to see the Seder meal, with its age old rituals, as some kind of historical reenactment, something like the guides who dress up in historical costumes and talk about life at Lower Fort Garry or Dalnavert. The Seder is much deeper, much more profound than that. In keeping the Passover, to tell the story and eat the food, salvation becomes a present day reality. The people around that table remember not only who they were, long ago in the mists of time, but more importantly who they are, today. The Passover meal is a way of remembering and enacting what it means to be a part of God's family now, what it means to be a Jew in 2020.

During my years at the Vancouver School of Theology, we had a professor who always lectured as though the past was the present. When he spoke about the disciples or the early church, it was always in the present tense, not as history but as our current reality. It was as though the people he spoke about were alive right now and with us. It was an interesting style that brought alive the Bible and church history, in fact the whole Christian story. *"Do you remember when Peter said to Jesus..."* was his approach, if I remember correctly.

Holy Communion in our church has the same dimension to it. We have a particular way we set the Holy Table, the Communion Table. A special white cloth covers the Table, bread and juice are prepared and carefully placed on that cloth. The Communion Service retells God's saving work throughout history, often including aspects of the Exodus story. The entire service has echoes of the Passover because the Last Supper was a Passover meal. The life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus is remembered with deep thanksgiving. At one point in the Communion prayer we say the ancient words: *"Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"* Later in the service we might say: *"Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on*

*us. Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us. Jesus, redeemer of the world, grant us peace.*" In our United Church tradition, local custom shapes the Communion practice and prayers so services will vary from congregation to congregation but the intent is still the same. In the custom, the ritual, the practice of celebrating Holy Communion, we remember and reenact that last supper, that Passover meal in the Upper Room with Jesus and the disciples, believing that Jesus is present with us, the host who invites us to gather and to eat with him. Past becomes present in the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Like the Passover Seder, Holy Communion shapes who we are and what we believe. Part of the pain this pandemic has inflicted on believers is the inability to worship together to celebrate this sacred meal. At least one congregation offers this prayer of lament each Sunday:

*Jesus, we believe that you are truly present in the Eucharistic meal. We love you above all else, and long to receive you in the sharing of this Sacrament. Help us to be aware of your presence with us in spirit, particularly at this time when we are unable to receive you in this sacred meal. We thank you for your promise that you are with us always, and that with you at the centre we are united wholly to you, each other, and the world in which we live. We pray this in your Holy Name. Amen.*

All people are shaped by stories, stories of where their family came from, how they used to live and how they currently live, what is important and what isn't so important. Funny stories, sad stories, real stories.

Often those stories are told and lived out when we gather to share a meal. Looking at family photos, for instance, is helpful in putting faces to names, but hearing the stories of the adventures and misadventures of those long gone family members brings them alive to us, alive in a way that we can almost imagine them being with us now.

Stories of days gone by also remind us that as those ancestors survived whatever threatened their existence, so too will we survive all that threatens us. Each generation faces its own challenges and dangers and each generation finds ways to continue on, to carry on, to live and to thrive.

There will come a time when we will be able to gather again around the Lord's Table, to break bread and share the cup, a time to reenact the story of God's great love for us in Jesus Christ, a time to meet Jesus uniquely in Holy Communion. And we know, we believe, we trust that time will come. Until then we remain hopeful, strengthened by the love of our family and friends, comforted by the fellowship of our sisters and brothers in the faith, confident that the love and grace of God we encounter in Holy Scripture, in the Holy Spirit and in our daily lives will be sufficient for each day. Amen.