Maundy Thursday 2012

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-18 and John 13:1-17, 33-35

While traveling down a two lane highway one afternoon the car in the lane ahead of me was traveling at a noticeably slower pace than the speed limit. While I wasn’t in any particular hurry, I did want to keep up at the posted 55 mph, so I passed the vehicle with a casual glance to see if it was anyone I knew. The driver and the passenger were eating their lunch. With a burger in one hand and a soft drink in the other, the car was holding a steady snail pace southward.

Traveling down any highway, at any hour, you are apt to pass someone eating, drinking, or talking on the cell phone. There is even a former District Superintendent that would read as he drove! Cell phones, books and maps aside, we have all balanced a cup of coffee or soft drink, munched a donut, or tried not to spill catsup on our shirts as we multitasked our way down the road. With the growing diversity of menu it’s really quite a challenge…how does a person eat a salad or tacos traveling at highway speeds?

Tonight, tradition calls us to commemorate two special meals. The first is the Passover Meal spoken of in Exodus. God has brought the final plague on the Egyptians, the death of the first-born male offspring. The Israelites are to mark their doorposts with Lamb’s blood to ward off this plague. Huddled behind closed doors they are to eat a symbolic last meal in hasty preparation for the Pharaoh’s decree to free the people at dawn the next day.

The second meal is that same Passover meal in an upper room, hidden from the view of the Scribes and Pharisees. While this Passover meal is required ritual for all Jews, there is sadness in the air for Jesus. For the disciples it starts out like any other Passover meal, yet it will end with a beginning that brings us to this very night.

In the Gospel of John’s telling of this last Passover meal Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” The word commandment in the Latin is *mandamus*; it’s the root word from which we get our word *mandate*. Thus the verse could read, “I give you a new *mandate*”, and from the word mandate we get *Maundy or Mandate Thursday*. The sharing of communion on this special night is a mandate to “love one another”.

So what does a fast food meal eaten as we speed down the highway possibly have to do with Passover and Holy Communion? There is something about eating hurriedly that jars our sensibilities; the pace either fails to get our attention or distracts us from what we should really be focusing on. Good meals are meant to be eaten slowly. It’s better for digestion, better for the souls and bodies of those seated at the table. Satisfying meals are marked by a leisurely pace - appetizers, soup, salad, several main courses, deserts, diverse beverages, time for conversation, no rush, no hurry, no schedule to meet. When all of this happens in a room of tasteful décor, served on beautiful china, polished silver and glittering crystal, all reflecting a gentle light of candles, where all the people are kind and congenial, that’s a truly memorable meal!

We refer to Communion as a celebration. When we speak of the heavenly banquet we use terms like “feast” and “abundance”. You may have heard me offer the elements saying “take, eat, feed on Him in your heart with thanksgiving.” How should we then come to Christ’s feast? We can look at this from two perspectives.

*The first is that a celebration feast is indeed abundant*. We need to slow down, to pull off to the side of life’s highway and pause to savor the gift given to us in these common elements of bread and cup. *Our spirits are starving for the nourishment only this meal can provide.* John Wesley felt communion should be celebrated daily to keep us always aware of our dependence on God for forgiveness and new life. When we serve the cup and bread by intinction, by dipping the bread into the cup, the portion we pull from the loaf should be generous, for God is a generous God.

Secondly, we need to listen carefully to the instructions given to the people that night in Egypt. You are to eat this meal with “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat hurriedly”. Like fast food and the Passover meal, *Communion is also a hurried meal, a meal eaten on the run. Jesus is about to be betrayed and we must be ready to follow him.* If we forget, we will become too settled, too comfortable, not uneasy enough with things as they are – in short, spiritually obese, spiritually at risk.

We are called upon to be servants at the world’s table. At most of our communion services the poor are missing, the homeless, people living with AIDS, the educationally disadvantaged, people of differing racial and cultural backgrounds, people who are physically and mentally challenged. We’re glad that there are street ministers and institutional chaplains serving them. We may even vote church budgetary support for those ministries. But it’s not the same. We are mandated to “love one another”. We are called upon to be ready as ministers ourselves. So it will be with tonight’s communion celebration.

The next time you grab that fast food meal or have managed to carve a peaceful moment to savor the flavor of the meal…remember, we eat of this bread and cup in memory of the living Christ…. We have a mandate to eat of this bread and cup. We have a mandate to “love one another.”