Holy Thursday: Mass of the Lord’s Supper
Cycle B, 3.29.18
Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14/

LEST WE FORGET

They say as we age there are two things we start to lose – the first is our memory, the second one is... I forget what the second one is. Tonight is a feast of remembering...not forgetting. The Passover Feast or Seder Supper, if you’ve ever celebrated it, especially with a Jewish family, is quite a celebration. Elaborate prayers and rousing songs and special foods commemorate the deliverance of a people from slavery in Egypt. The angel of death “passed over” the houses of the children of Israel because they were marked with the blood of the lamb. This was recounted for us in the reading from the Book of Exodus. Did you notice how the passage ended: This day shall be a memorial... All your generations shall celebrate... as a perpetual institution. This was not a one-time event. The people were to do this year after year as a reminder. This sacred ritual was to be repeated let they forget what the Lord had done for them in their passage from slavery to freedom.

In point of fact, the Israelites did forget. Once a wandering people, they became an established nation. Confident in their own power and forgetful of their dependence on God, they were easily lured away from their covenant relationship with God to idols of their own making. Throughout the Sundays of Lent we listened to stories about the failure of the Israelites to maintain their loyalty to the One God. The reading from the Book of Chronicles on the Fourth Sunday of Lent said: They mocked the messengers of God, despised God’s warnings, and scoffed at his prophets. They were carried off to captivity worse than that in Egypt. Overtaken by foreign powers, they had been driven from their homes like cattle...forced to march through rugged and broken land to a foreign country. Picture in your mind refugees from the WWII huddled on a train platform or a Syrian refugee family rummaging through a pile of garbage in a city dump today.

It’s a scene that occurs in the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah and other prophets. Who were these people driven from their homes? They were God’s people, God’s chosen people, a nation once strong and confident in their wealth, their military and their religion. But now they were exiles...strangers in a strange land. Now they owned nothing but their memories of the past. For the people of God in exile in Babylon, the memory of the Temple they had built and the beauty of the liturgy tugged at their hearts. They remembered where they came from – the night of the Exodus, and the memory that they carried with them kept alive the hope of liberation...that someday they would again set foot in Jerusalem and rebuild the House of God.
Their story reminds us that, on our journey through life, *the things we carry define who we are*. This week I received the blessing of walking on sacred ground. Two women from our community, both in their late nineties, are nearing the end of their earthly journeys. Their families requested that I offer the prayer of the Church for them in their final stage of life. Often times in pastoral visits like these, I find that a person is not alert, not able to communicate. That wasn’t the case. The first, whose daughter thought her mom may not make it through the day, was awake, rosary in hand, and able to reminisce about her early days at St. Perpetua many years ago. Her daughter said her mom had been suffering from dementia and Alzheimer’s for several years, but that certainly wasn’t in evidence as I read the scriptures to her and as we prayed the Our Father after the anointing. She was able to shared Communion, or Viaticum as it’s called when given to a dying person – “food for the journey.”

“There were a lot of us.” She knew, even when approaching that final passage which we must each make one day – alone – that being a follower of Jesus means being a member of a community, a family of faith dedicated to God and to one another. Two women, two long lives, two testimonies to the important things to remember when everything else falls away – prayer and community. Moments such as the one we share tonight: the prayer of the Church... during this sacred time... on this sacred ground... in the company of our community.

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Is there something that you carry with you that reminds you of “where you’ve come from?” An item in your possession folded up with the receipts, stuffed next to the credit cards or crammed in your pocket...a cross? A rosary? The wedding band on your finger? A photo? Something that that helps you remember who you are and where you’re going? Not in the eyes of world, but in the eyes of God?

There’s an ancient tale about the waters of Lethe, one of the five rivers of the underworld. When a person dies, according to Greek mythology, he or she comes to the river that divides the land of the living from the land of the no-longer-living. This is the River Lethe. Before each crossing, the boatman, whose task it is to ferry the newly deceased across the river, offers his passengers a drink from the waters of Lethe, the waters of forgetfulness.
If they drink, they will forget everything that had happened to them on earth. They will forget the painful moments of their lives – but they will also forget their experience of happiness as well. They would forget the trauma of illness and the bitterness of rejection, but they would also sacrifice their joyful memories of love and wonderful people, of the beautiful sounds of music and the sight of blossoming trees. It would be as if they had never tasted life. If they choose not to drink, they would be left with all their memories for all eternity.

According to the myth, no one, no matter how bitter their days had been, chooses to drink the waters of Lethe. Our memories are so important to us. They teach us, they console us, they define us. Tonight and tomorrow and Saturday’s Vigil are about remembering. *Do this in memory of me*, Jesus bids us, as we heard in Paul’s epistle. *When you wash another’s feet, remember me and what I have taught you about humble compassion. When you eat this bread and drink this cup, remember me and what I have taught you about being brothers and sisters to one another.*

Remembering can be difficult; memories often point out our shortcomings and reopen old wounds. But memories give us hope that love is possible, that life can be transformed, that God is in our midst. Tonight is about remembering: the memory of Jesus, the Christ, who begins this night, for our sake, his great Passover from death to life. At this table, in the “upper room” of our own church, the memory of Jesus becomes a living reality. Jesus speaks to us again and again in the pages of the Gospel book, in the basin, pitcher and towel, in the Eucharistic bread and wine.

The memory we relive tonight and tomorrow and the next day re-creates us, identifies us, makes us who we are as human beings

> who love,
> who care,
> who heal,
> who forgive,
> who lift up,

who remember what we will carry in our hearts when the Lord calls us home.

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