

CELEBRATE!**Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-20**

I recently read a commentary in which the theologian asserted "Wherever and whenever we meet in the name of Christ, we should consider him as present in the midst of us." As I thought on this I began to think about what it would look like if Jesus were literally present every time we came together. How would Jesus' physical presence in our midst change our fellowship meals, our committee meetings, choir practice, youth and Fun Folks outings? When we meet with others and invoke the name of Jesus in prayer, there He is, does that change or should that change our behavior, the way we interact with one another? It seems to me that every time we come together with Jesus should be a time of celebration.

In the passage from the Gospel, according to Matthew, Jesus gives a clear blue-print for how our communities might be holy places where holy relationships might flourish. Jesus says, essentially, that being a member of the church means you have a responsibility. When people come together there will be differences but Jesus gives the plan for how to take care of those differences and to maintain healthy relationships in the name of Jesus Christ. Real churches have – or should have – real conflicts. The only real harm that will come to a church community is to refuse to deal with conflicts. Conflicts do not kill churches. Refusing to deal with conflict in healthy ways will and does kill faith communities.

Jesus gave these instructions to the disciples because the apostles were, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to establish the rules of the church discipline, as well as to announce the gospel. These same rules apply to us today as we instructed, as disciples of Jesus Christ, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to announce the gospel to those around us (go tell), as well as establish the rules of church discipline.

The reading from Exodus includes God's detailed instructions for the Passover for the Israelites. These instructions include the provision that all generations who come should observe this celebration. There are consequences to sustained rebellion and disobedience against God and God's purposes for the world, consequences that inevitably spill over to future generations. God directs that this is to CELEBRATED for generations to come.

There is the close link between worship and the events of our redemption. Our priorities are shaped by our time, and thus the command to observe the Passover or other festivals of remembrance shapes our lives and gives them a contour that emphasizes God's place in the story of God's people. The Exodus teaches us about ethical passion. But as the world has crept into the lives of Christians, I fear that we have not held as firmly to the Christian celebrations. We do not celebrate Jesus' presence in our midst as frequently as our Jewish brothers and sisters.

I suggest to you that the beauty of these passages brought together is that Christians and Jews celebrate our Faith differently. However, in each of our ways, we strive to carry out what God has directed.... Or do we? Is Matthew's portrayal of Jesus simply helpful or inspiring because we Presbyterian Christians like to think it has located us on God's side, on the right side?

The Good News that you heard includes an invitation: right now, as you are, you can be a part of something – specially, a member of the Body of Christ... The tricky part is that the Body of Christ includes an awful lot of people who are every bit as difficult as we are. I invite you to celebrate every moment and every person, every difference and every likeness, as an opportunity to be with Jesus. Surely Jesus is in our midst. He is here. Can you see him?