

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

JOHN 14: 33, 34; 14:1-6

APRIL 13, 2006 - MAUNDY THURSDAY

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This supper is the calm before the storm—an intimate moment between Jesus and his followers that ranks with the quiet and holy night of his birth.

His life was filled with confrontation and debate, swarming crowds, constant extroverting. He did take care of himself occasionally by retreating and praying.

But there is some comfort knowing that at the beginning and end of his life, before all of the drama and demands, there was peace-filled stillness.

The table was prepared for Passover. Carol and I sat at a Passover table last night with about fifteen people. It was a diverse group: age, race, profession, religion.

Even though most of us did not know everyone at the table there was a discernable feeling of solidarity. We came as fellow travelers. We came to hear the ancient story of God's delivering the people from slavery. We came to share our own specific hopes that God would bring deliverance in our time.

We remembered God's sorrow at the death of the Egyptians for they too were his children and how God chastised his angels for celebrating the Egyptian demise. We marveled at this loving God.

We sang the "Dayenu" – the litany of God's great acts liberating the people. We affirmed that any one of those acts would have been enough to keep alive hope in God's goodness. Each of those acts a Waterloo, God's stand with our ancestors in Egypt against the forces of darkness.

We ate the bitter herbs and horoseth recalling Israel's tears of suffering and forced labor. We dropped blood red wine on our plates recalling the plagues. We ate the unleavened bread, remembering Israel's urgent departure from Egypt.

And we prayed at the end of the meal that this time next year all of God's children, everywhere, would be free.

I suspect that the ritual and tone of the Passover Jesus celebrated with his followers and the Passover meal we ate last night are not so different. It makes perfect sense that Jesus would institute what has become the Christian Seder of deliverance—Communion—in the very heart of the Hebrew experience of deliverance from Pharaoh—Passover Seder.

I believe Jesus knew this last supper with his friends was an opportunity to make a lasting impression. They say first impressions stick with you. I think the same can be said of last impressions. The last time we saw a loved one. The last time we saw the cottage at the lake. The last time we talked to an old friend.

The lasting impression he made summed up his life and death. My body given for you, my blood shed for you. I give you a new commandment to love one another. I am going to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also. Do not be troubled, do not let your hearts be afraid. Believe in me, I am sending you an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will guide and comfort you until I return.

For centuries Christians have regarded this as one of the most holy nights of the year because of the indelible memory Jesus gave to his disciples. I love that old story about how Dr. Butzer went to the Session of this church in 1949 before there was an early childhood program.

In his hand he had a ball of clay and he inserted his thumb in the soft clay and held it up so that all the elders could see.

Then he said to them the mind and heart of a child is impressionable like this clay. I propose to you tonight that we start a school called the School of Religious Impression so that we can impress our children with the love of God and the way of wholeness and life.

It occurs to me that Jesus' last supper with his disciples did the same thing. He knew the disciples, like children, were impressionable. So he held up to them the bread and broke it, the cup and poured it and said this is my life broken, poured out for you.

It was as if he was saying to them, I am giving you a lasting impression of my love for you so that you will always remember me. I charge you to do this whenever you come to this table.

You might say churches—no matter their size or shape—exist to do one thing. To be schools that re-enact that lasting impression Christ made with his followers. His words—that he died for us—are the imprint of his love upon our lives, an imprint deeper than all the other impressions that have shaped and sometimes even distorted our lives.

One of the lasting impressions of my life is of my grandmother scooping me up in her arms whenever I entered or left her home on the east side of Pittsburgh. It was something she did so lovingly that as I have remembered it over my lifetime has seeped deep into my consciousness.

That very act of love and affirmation is an important part of my own sense of who I am and of my well being as a member of the human family. It is one of those formative lasting impressions alive within me that still stirs my heart and shapes who I am.

So may this holy supper, begun all those years ago, and Christ's lasting promise to deliver us from the prison of despair and brokenness, be a lasting impression in your heart. And may it stir you to bold faith and heroic service. Amen.