

“WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE: III – BROKEN FOR YOU”

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Elkton United Methodist Church

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Third Sunday of Lent

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 26:26-29

It was Passover and the time had come for Jesus and the disciples to sit down at the Passover meal and remember together all that God had done for his people when they were enslaved in Egypt. They would sit together and eat together and remember God’s faithfulness to all generations. They did it every year at Passover and this year would be no different.

Over two thousand years later, Jews still do it. They come together at Passover and remember. Now, they do it a little more elaborately than they did in Jesus’ day. Since about the first century, Jews have held what are called Seder meals. Whole families gather together and engage in a prescribed ritual of remembrance. Everything is symbolic, everything is a means to helping those gathered remember the events of Hebrew enslavement under the Egyptians and their miraculous deliverance at the hands of a loving God.

The table is filled with symbols – like a lamb bone calling people to remember the sacrificial lamb offered on the night the Hebrews fled Egypt; and matzah, reminding them of the unleavened bread; an egg, symbolizing renewal; a salad made from a mix of apples, nuts and cinnamon, symbolizing the mortar with which the enslaved Hebrews built structures for the Egyptians; and a sprig of parsley that is dipped during the ritual in salt water, to remind those around the table of the bitter tears cried in captivity. Those and other things on the table serve to walk the participants on the journey from the horror of captivity in Egypt to the joy of new life after God delivered them into freedom.

Back in Jesus’ day it was not so elaborate, but meaningful nonetheless. They gathered to remember where they had been and where God had brought them, and so on that night of what we now call “The Last Supper” Jesus and his disciples gathered for the Passover meal – just like they did every year, and they had no reason to expect that this year would be any different.

And it wasn’t – until – Jesus picked up the bread, gave God thanks for it, and then broke it in two and gave it to his disciples, saying “Take, eat, this is my body.” Then he lifted the chalice of wine, and said, “Drink from this, all of you, for this is the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

So, what started out as a meal to remember the past, suddenly became a meal to remember the future – what was soon to come – Jesus’ death on the cross. For as soon as they finished this meal together, they went out to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus would pray that the cup of suffering might pass from him, but if it was God’s will, he would pay the price on the cross for the sin of the world.

And not long after, that’s exactly what he did. He went to the cross, he paid the price for the sins of humanity, he paid the price that you and I might have life. And the holy meal that we will share today, that Christians throughout history have shared regularly, reminds us, every single time when the bread is broken and the wine poured, of his love for us that gave it all.

You might remember that after Jesus’ resurrection, two disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus and they were joined by a stranger, who wondered why they were despondent. They told him about the death of their Savior, and how they were devastated by his loss. Later on they invited that stranger to dinner, and it was over dinner, when the bread was broken and the wine poured, they realized that it was Jesus, right there with them. They recognized him in the bread and wine – just as Jesus had said they would.

There was a reason, I think, that Jesus started that ritual of remembrance in the Upper Room with his disciples. I think he knew how easily we forget, how time passes and we forget. And I think he knew that when times get tough, we need help remembering - remembering the promises of God, remembering how God has helped us in the past, and promises to help us again – how God loved us so much he sent his only Son into the world to save us.

I read an amazing story this week told by a pastor in England by the name of Samuel Wells. He’s actually the pastor of one of my favorite churches in London – St. Martin in the Fields. To be serving in that important parish, my assumption is that he’s a very gifted preacher, and that assumption was confirmed when I learned through his story that he was asked to provide a devotion on BBC radio, along with other gifted preachers.

Apparently, on BBC radio, at exactly 7:48 each morning, “a religious leader speaks live for two minutes and forty-five seconds about an issue in the news and its theological significance. It’s called ‘Thought for the Day’ and it attracts around 6 million listeners.” Isn’t that incredible? (Samuel Wells, “The Three Nails,” *Christian Century*, 2/28/18, p. 37)

Well, about five years ago, Wells, as I said was asked to be one of the speakers, and was delighted to say “yes.”

One day, sometime later, he was in his office at the church when he received a phone call. Immediately, Wells said, he recognized the man’s voice and he was transported back in his ministry about 25 years and remembered that man, who was a firefighter. When he heard the man’s voice, he wondered why he was calling, and hoped it wasn’t that something bad had happened to him or someone he loved

Instead, the man told him that he had heard Pastor Wells on the radio that morning and decided that he would call him. He really was not expecting him to answer, he had been prepared to leave a voicemail message, but lo and behold, Pastor Sam had answered.

So they spent a few moments catching up, since they hadn't seen each other in probably 20 years or so. After about fifteen minutes, Pastor Sam started to try to wind down the conversation since he had a ton of work to get to – and a few seconds later, they said goodbye, and the call ended.

About ten minutes later, the phone rang again, and – it was that man again, who said that he had been so surprised that Pastor Wells had picked up, that he had forgotten what he had actually called to tell him.

He said, “I have a confession to make.’ ‘Well,’ Pastor Wells said, ‘I’m in the business. Take your time.’

He started. ‘Do you remember your first Easter at St. Luke’s? Two weeks before Easter, at the Sunday service, you gave each one of us three nails. You said, ‘Put these somewhere where you’ll be close to them every day. And on Easter morning, bring them back with you and put them in the font and celebrate what those nails really mean.’

‘How about that?’ Pastor Wells said, ‘Tell me about your confession.’

‘The truth is, I never brought the nails back. When I took the nails home, I knew what I wanted to do. The next day, I took them to the fire station. I picked up my firefighter’s overalls and I sewed each one of them into its own pocket across my chest. And then I gave each one of them a name.’

‘The first one, the largest one, I called Faith. The second one, the rusty one, I called Courage. And the third one, the twisted, almost broken one, I called Hope. And from then on, for the next 20 years, every time the bell went and we jumped down the chute into the fire tender to go out on a job, I would put my hand on my chest. My hand would cover the pocket with the first nail, and I would say, “Be close to me, I need you with me.” I would move across to the second nail and would say, “Give me the strength to do what I need to do today.” And then I’d find the third, twisted, smaller nail, and I’d say, “Help me make it through to live another day.”

‘I kept those three nails in my overalls, until six years ago when I retired. And when I heard your voice on the radio, I thought it was time to tell you why I never brought them back that Easter Day.’

Pastor Wells says that he “was silent for about as long as you can be silent on the phone without making your companion nervous. He was in awe.”

And then he wrote this: “Twenty-five years ago I’d had an idea for a way to help members of a congregation get a glimpse of Christ’s passion. Turned out one of them spent the next 20 years living resurrection every day.” (Ibid.)

You know, I was so moved by that story, that I briefly thought to myself, oh, I should give out three nails to everybody in worship this Sunday. But then I thought, “No, I don’t have to.”

Because the symbols are right here – right there on that communion table – bread and wine. We will hold them, we will touch them, in them we will see Jesus and hear him say again, “remember me, remember the price I paid for you, remember my body broken for you, remember how much I loved you and love you still.”

My prayer, dear friends, is that, just like that firefighter drew faith, courage and hope from those nails, so too may we draw faith, courage and hope from this holy meal, not just today, but all the days to come. May it be so.

Amen.