

“WWJD”

Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17; 31b-35

“In the Heights” is the Tony-award winning Broadway musical about finding yourself and finding home. In the interest of full disclosure, it was the recent performance at Amity High School in which my step-son Ryan played the role of Sonny, comic-relief for the main character, Usnavi de la Vega.

Set in today’s Washington Heights, Manhattan within sight of the George Washington Bridge, the heavily Latino community struggles with the issues of immigration and assimilation that have marked every generation of new Americans. Indeed, the director, Rob Kennedy, wrote in his program notes *“This is not just a play about Latinos or New Yorkers; this play is about all of us. It’s about America.”*

One character, Carla, is the comic-relief to her business partner, Daniela. Both operate the local hair salon. While Daniela is the no-nonsense “tough love” owner with her employees and customers, Carla is a bit spacy, easy going and, most importantly for this message, an active Christian who talks about what her church and pastor say. At one point she says to Daniela, *“What would Jesus do?”* to which Daniela quickly retorts, *“Do I look like Jesus?”* and then, turning to look upward, declares, *“Jesus, pardone me.”*

“What would Jesus do?” For too many it comes trippingly off the tongue, a question for which the answer is presumed to be obvious. WWJD. What would Jesus do?

On this Maundy Thursday night, what Jesus does is surprising and counter-cultural, although rooted in the deepest spirituality of his faith, the Passover. Jesus gathers his disciples to celebrate the Passover. It is easy, in the midst of our Christian liturgy, to forget this night’s origin in the ancient Jewish festival of freedom. Wrested from the syncretism of the Canaanite agricultural festival that was its antecedent, the Passover marks one of the most fundamental new departures in religious history.

From an historic event – deliverance from Egyptian slavery- a memorial meal was made. The fundamental context of life, Biblically speaking, shifts from humanity-in-nature to humanity-in-history. God speaks divinely in mighty deeds of choosing, calling, saving, judging.

The Passover recalls that, at a moment, God acts to emancipate us, to bring us into covenant, to lead us as pilgrims through the wilderness and to the place of promise. The Passover says it this way: “*And when in time to come your son asks you ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage.’*” Indeed, at Passover time collapses, as does the distinction between “then” and “now.” For the devout Jew, remembering year by year this saving event, time is obliterated: we are in our forebears and they in us. The Passover’s recollection and renewal of the covenant is not a dim and distant memory but rather a present reality. The Mishnah, in famous words, comments: “*In every generation a person must regard themselves as if they came forth out of Egypt.*”

So too the Communion, as tonight’s Epistle recalls: “*this is my body, broken for you.*” Christ’s real presence in the Sacrament, by faith, is a present reality, not just a memorial meal. Christ the Passover lamb is sacrificed for us, sealing the promises of freedom from sin, pointing us to resurrection. As John of Damascus wrote in the 7th century:

*The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad:
The Passover of gladness, the Passover of God
From death to life eternal, from earth unto the sky,
Our Christ hath brought us over, with hymns of victory.*

But I am ahead of myself and the story. Before resurrection, Christ—and we who follow him—must face many things: temptation and tests of our faith and suffering among them.

Which is where Jesus confounds us. For on this night he takes the servant’s role and calls us to service in the name of love. He washes the feet of the disciples, an act of welcome and hospitality. He washes the feet of the disciples, the job of a slave. We heard the words from Philippians last Sunday; did we, as the young people say, “get it?”

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and...humbled himself and
became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV

So this ancient meal, clothed in liturgical respectability, must become a launching pad for sacrificial service. WWJD? We don't need to ask. The story tells us. He would serve.

The redeeming power of Communion, in the context of Passover emancipation and the foot-washing servant ministry of Jesus, transforms us as it did the earliest disciples. Not that we would know it by what happened from the Gospel accounts of this night. But this night is not the end of the story. The disciples who knew Jesus, who loved him and who, in his darkest hour, abandoned him, were still the band he had to work with. It's the same today. You and I, at our best and worst, are who God in Christ has chosen for this work of service.

But to what end? Not just service but, as with Jesus, the redemption promised by God in Christ and continuing to be worked out in every age. People are hungry, literally, and it is right and good that they be fed. But Jesus knew, in his first go-round with the Temptation, that *"people shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* The deeper hungers are spiritual. Freedom from want and fear and freedom to become that "human being fully alive," as St. Irenaeus phrased it. Hunger for purpose: to mean something, to make a difference.

Like Daniela in "In the Heights," we may say *"Do I look like Jesus?"* Let me answer her question this way: I once heard a high school principal speak at his school's sports recognition event. The father of two pre-school children, he spoke with admiration of the sacrifice of the parents of the athletes who ran children hither and yon to athletic, academic and artistic endeavors as he began that phase with his own children. But then he moved from identification to inspiration:

“Would any of you done it differently?” he challenged as well as congratulated us. “Would any of you, for a moment, have done less if it meant your son or daughter would not be present tonight; and who among you would not, at a moment’s notice, do it all over again?”

If we who follow Jesus aspire to these things in earthly life, how much more can we, with the help of the One who gave it all for us, do so in our spiritual life.

You and I are chosen for service. We know what Jesus would do. Let us do the same:

*Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve
the neighbors we have from you.*