

To remind you
Exodus 12:1-14
September 7, 2008

Today you are invited once more to come to this table and to receive the gifts Jesus offers you here. Once more. You are invited once more.

Some of you may be taking communion for the first time today, but most of you have taken communion dozens of times, even hundreds of times. And next month, on the first Sunday of the month, you will be invited again!

Before I began my ministry here, First Congregational UCC celebrated communion four times a year. Now we do it fourteen times a year: on the first Sunday of each month, at the midnight service on Christmas Eve, and on Maundy Thursday. Sometimes we celebrate communion at our healing services too or at other special times.

Of course, at my mother's church in Maine, St. Francis-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, and at Central Christian Church on Kimball Avenue, and at Sacred Heart across the street, the Lord's Supper is celebrated every Sunday. For these churches, word and sacrament are inseparable. Whenever they gather for worship, they listen to the Word of God be read and preached and they share the bread and the wine. Every Sunday, they feed their minds and their hearts and their bodies. Worship without one or the other, without the reading of Scripture or without communion, would simply not be complete.

So who's right? How often should we celebrate communion?

We could debate our feelings and opinions, but such a debate, I think, would miss the point. The point is this: we should celebrate communion regularly, repeatedly, often, however we interpret "often!"

Why? Why should we celebrate communion regularly, repeatedly, often? Because you don't see a burning bush every day!

Am I right? Do you see burning bushes every day, a lilac or a forsythia engulfed in flames, but not burning up? Have you ever seen a burning bush?

Moses saw one. Once. Just once in a lifetime. God grabbed his attention, broke through the reverie of his quiet and comfortable and risk-free life, and told him to go to Egypt!

How many times has that happened to you? How often have you experienced a moment when God grabbed your attention? When you had a vivid and palpable sense that God was there with you? When you unmistakably heard God call you?

How many times has that happened to you? Once in a lifetime? A couple of times? Never? I do hope you have experienced such a moment, at some time in your life, but I know such experiences are rare, as rare as a burning bush! Most of the time we muddle along -- by faith -- maybe not in the dark, but almost. Most of the time, we pursue our lives occupied, preoccupied, by what is right in front of our noses, by what is on our to-do lists, by what we need and want at the moment.

But once a week, or once a month, or a few times a year, we come to the communion table, and we are reminded. We are reminded of the One who is with us, then and now and always, and we are reminded of what we are called to be and to do. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus said. Its purpose is to remind you.

You must celebrate this day as a religious festival to remind you of what I, the Lord, have done.

That's what the Lord told Moses and Aaron according to the record in Exodus chapter 12. This chapter is rather curious actually, because in the midst of telling the story of the exodus from Egypt, the narrative suddenly breaks off to describe the particulars for keeping the Passover celebration. Before the event itself takes place, the plans for remembering it year after year after year are laid out in detail. It's as if an historian recounting the signing of the Declaration of Independence stopped in the middle of the story to describe arrangements for the ongoing celebration of the July 4 national holiday!

But you have to remember that the story of the exodus is told in hindsight, hundreds of years after the event itself. At that time, the Passover celebration would have been very much a part of their ongoing religious tradition, and the telling of the exodus story served to explain its origin and its purpose.

This is why we do it! This is what we remember! We remember that night! That terrible night when Egypt was judged and our people were set free!

We remember that night when our ancestors marked their doorposts with blood, and gathered their families for a hurried meal, and readied themselves for a quick departure. We remember that night when our mothers and fathers heard the loud cries of grief-stricken Egyptian mothers and fathers as they walked out of Egypt at last, free at last!

So every year, the Passover is celebrated once more, to remember once more what the Lord has done, to remember once more the great price paid for their freedom, to remember once more what they owe to the God who saved them and made them his own.

Otherwise they might forget.

That's the risk, that they would forget.

When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in and when your cattle and sheep, your silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, be sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. He led you through that vast and terrifying desert where there were poisonous snakes and scorpions. In that dry and waterless land he made water flow out of solid rock for you. In the desert he gave you manna to eat, food that your ancestors had never eaten. He sent hardships on you to test you, so that in the end he could bless you with good things. So then, you must never think that you have made yourselves wealthy by your own power and strength.

When life is easy and comfortable, when you are managing just fine on your own, thank you, it is easy to forget. Easy to forget your history, forget your debt, forget the One who holds you and keeps you and saves you and guides you.

The risk is that they would be filled with pride, that they would think they have done it all themselves, that they would think they have only themselves to thank for their freedom and their prosperity.

The risk is apathy, lack of passion. A dull, soft, complacent contentment, neither hot nor cold, not too worked up about anything unless it be a matter of making sure they get what's coming to them. Living for the sake of what is at hand, the pleasures and rewards of work and play, but none too concerned about anything else, anything bigger, anything other. Singing songs without passion, praying prayers without passion, giving alms without passion, talking about the Lord without passion!

How can you do that? How can you talk about the Lord without passion? How can you sing and pray and give without passion?

But that is the risk for us, too. The greatest risk for the people of First Congregational UCC is apathy, lack of passion. Going through the motions. Doing it the way we always have because it's the way we always have. Practicing our religion as part of our routine, one more of the many and various civic duties we fulfill.

The risk is that we will think we've done it all ourselves, that we have made ourselves what we are and this church what it is, and that we only have ourselves to thank or ourselves to blame for what it will become.

The risk is that we will forget, that we will forget who we are and from where we came and on whom we depend. The risk is that we will forget that we have been saved and forget what we have been saved for.

That's why we need to come back to this table -- to remember. To remember the debt we can never repay. To remember our lives are not our own, but that we have been brought back to God, bought back for God, by Jesus' offering of his own body and blood. To remember that all we are and all we have we are and have only by the grace and mercy of God.

And to remember our call, our call to follow Jesus, our call to follow the One who gave himself for the sake of humanity, our call to follow him by doing the same, by giving ourselves for the sake of humanity. Yes, that's our call! To give ourselves away for ... their sake!

Why was Israel brought out of Egypt? The people of Israel were brought out of slavery in Egypt so they could fulfill the call first given to their ancestor Abraham: to be the means of bringing blessing to all the nations of the world.

And why did Jesus give himself for you? Jesus blessed you so you would be a blessing, to your neighbors and to the nations, to your friends and to your enemies, to all the people of this world! Now is that something to be passionate about or what?