

Maundy Thursday
April 5, 2007

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Exodus 12:1-14, Luke 22:7-34

As I read tonight's text, the Passion Story as recorded by Luke, I was struck by the contrasts between Jesus' actions and those of the disciples around him. Here was Jesus, sharing this Passover meal with them, even though he knew what was in their hearts.

Jesus was giving them everything, eventually even his life, his own body and blood. And he was doing it for a bunch of followers who consistently got it wrong, or sometimes half-right. The disciples around Jesus still didn't understand his idea of Kingdom. They had a bad habit of thinking too highly of themselves. One would betray him. Another would three times deny knowing him. It would have been totally understandable if Jesus had decided this crew just wasn't going to cut it, giving up on them and going to look for some other, better, batch of followers. Yet here he was, eating with them. Sharing bread and wine with them. Not giving up on them, even in the face the events to come.

But this shouldn't be all that surprising I suppose. What Jesus did that night isn't all that different from what God had been doing for a very long time, God doesn't give up on the Israelites, even when they were unfaithful and forgetful of all that God had done for them. In some ways, that was the point of Passover. The Jews were supposed to share the Passover meal specifically for the purpose of remembering God's saving acts. I suspect God knew the children of Israel would get wrapped up in their own lives and their own accomplishments and they would forget how God had brought them out of slavery and fed them as they wandered in the wilderness.

The one person who most intrigues me in this version of the story is Judas. Here is Judas, sharing bread with Jesus, his teacher and friend. And yet Judas has arranged to find a time to betray Jesus to the authorities. One could say that somewhere along the way, Judas gave up on Jesus, on God's ways as revealed in Jesus. Judas decided to take matters into his own hands. We shouldn't be too hard on Judas, since trusting God's ways is really the hardest part. It is hard to trust that humility, service, kindness, and forgiveness can change the world. It's easy to look for other ways to get things done. It is all too easy to give up on God's ways.

From the vantage point of Maundy Thursday's Passover table, one can see that God didn't give up on these disciples. Even though Jesus knew Peter would deny him, he was still there at the table. And after the resurrection Jesus forgave Peter, and Peter's boldness lead him to assume his leadership role once again. The other 10 could have easily said to Peter, "Hey, wait a minute. Who do you think you are? You denied him. Get outa here!" But they didn't. Jesus hadn't given up on Peter, so how could they?

I sometimes wonder even about Judas. Another Gospel tells us that Judas hanged himself. In some ways, I think this was the other way in which Judas gave up on God. Thinking

his actions were unforgivable, he took his own life. Who knows but what Jesus would have forgiven Judas as well. We can leave that pondering for another day.

The message for us in all of this is simply that God does not give up on us either. Sometimes we get it completely wrong, or maybe only half right. Most of the time we still don't understand Jesus' way of the Kingdom of God. We have a bad habit of thinking too highly of ourselves. Sometimes we even betray or deny our Lord. And yet God continues to call us to servanthood and to fellowship with God. God continually offers us forgiveness and the chance to begin again.

And if God so steadfastly refuses to give up on us, we should at least try not to give up on each other. There isn't anyone that we have the right to say isn't welcome here because of things they have done, or said, or whatever. We are just like those disciples, doing our best, but still getting it wrong. And the good news is that God never gives up on us either. God keeps calling us into fellowship with God, servanthood in the Kingdom, and community in the risen Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen