

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

Kirby Lawrence Hill

March 24, 2016 Maundy Thursday

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Luke 22:7-23

WHAT KIND OF MEAL?

Someone told me of a trip they took to England, where they were in a church that had a communion table that looked like a desk. Upon asking about it, they found out about its significance. During the church's history dating back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a member of England's Parliament named William Wilberforce had been one of its members. He had joined the church after becoming a Christian as an adult. Soon thereafter, Wilberforce came into contact with a group of anti-slave trade activists, part of an early grass-roots human rights campaign. They persuaded him to take on the cause of abolition in Parliament, as an expression of his new-found faith. It took twenty years of effort, but finally the abolition of the trade of slaves throughout the British Empire was signed into law in 1807. The desk on which the bill had been written now serves as the communion table in that Anglican church.

The desk now used as a table combines the understanding of the sacrament of communion with liberation from slavery. Jesus' last meal with his disciples was a Passover meal, similar to the Seder meals our Jewish friends observe. It is the Jewish feast of liberation, the commemoration of the deliverance of God's people from bondage when they had been slaves in Egypt. The Hebrew people had moved to Egypt during a famine. They were treated well at first, but in subsequent generations they had become enslaved. God called Moses to lead them out of slavery and into a promised land. The plagues seemed necessary to motivate Pharaoh to release these slaves. They also showed God to be more powerful than all of the Egyptian gods, as each of the plagues demonstrated the weakness or inability of an Egyptian god to protect the Egyptian people. The final plague was to be escaped only if the lintel and doorposts of the house were sprinkled with the blood of a lamb. This blood was a sign of the covenant God had made with the Hebrew people. God promised to pass over the houses so marked, so that the plague would not be visited upon them. That last plague would lead to their release, and the Passover meal would give them the awareness and strength to journey toward their liberation.

One of the things that has interested me in the liturgy of a modern Seder meal is the use of 'we' and 'us' language instead of 'they' and 'them' terminology. It is not "they" who were freed from slavery in Egypt. It is "us." This is a meal that not only establishes memory of liberation, but establishes identity for our God as One who liberates and for us as a people who exist by God's grace. You and I are not slaves in Egypt, but there is something from which each one of us needs to be freed – bitterness, selfish priorities, unfounded fears, anxieties, obsessions, despair, shallow purposes, complacency, unjust structures – fill in the blank. It may be something external or internal from which we need to be freed. This night, we remember that we have a God who is committed to our freedom, a God who has the power to bring it about.

It was considered to be a blessing to be able to eat the Passover in Jerusalem. But neither Jesus nor any of his disciples had a house there in the city in which to gather for their observance. God's meal of deliverance and God's act of liberation aren't limited to just where we live. It can move wherever God wants to take it – from a borrowed upper room, to a place of searching for God's will, to a place of violence and even death. And, on this Easter Sunday, we'll affirm once again that God's liberation is not limited to just this life.

When the first Passover meal was completed, the Hebrew people were not yet free. God had put in place what would lead to their liberation, but they had to walk into the deliverance that God had prepared for them. When we have finished this meal, we are not done – we have simply been nourished to move toward the liberation God

has made available to us.

The original Last Supper was at the heart of a movement that was old and at the heart of a movement that was new. The sacrament of holy communion connects all who are followers of Jesus with God's redemptive work in the past and the present that shapes the future. When we respond to our Lord's invitation to come to the communion table, we gather to take in the words of emancipation that comes from it, and the liberating love that goes beyond words.