

This Do

Michael Jenkins

Text: I Corinthians 11: 23-26

April 18, 2019 (Maundy Thursday) | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

“How is this night different from all other nights?”

This is the question asked each year by the youngest person at the Passover table, at the meal which our Jewish neighbors will observe tomorrow evening.

It is a good question - and an appropriate question - for us tonight as we remember the Passover meal at which our Lord Jesus presided on the eve of his arrest. “How is this night different from all other nights?”

Here we enter the realm of mystery. Not magic. But mystery. Tonight is a night for questions.

Jesus and his followers gathered around a dinner table. Their Passover was not performed in a temple but at an ordinary table, just like it will happen all over our city tomorrow night. What does it mean for such high liturgy to be performed in such a common place, the most common where we gather to eat and talk and reminisce together? What does it mean for liturgy to be lived? Can it mean that life can become liturgy?

You know as well as I do that the word “liturgy” itself simply means “the work of the people.” And wasn’t that the squabble between the parties of Saint Paul and Saint James? How does work fit with faith? Which is more important, faith or works?

What if the expert in the law who questioned Jesus was almost right about the end but not at all about the means? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asked. Haven’t we also asked this question at one time or another? But, what if eternal life isn’t a something you get, but some thing you do? What if that doing is eternal life?

This week I’ve wrestled with a sentence from Carlyle Marney: “Faith is belief that obeys, and to be Christian is inseparable from the demand to do Christ.” Marney, who wrestled with the demons of a Baptist whisky priest, and, in compassion for other ministers who struggled with their own addictions and demons, founded the Interpreter’s House, a safe refuge for healing: Marney, I think, had his finger on the pulse of the gospel. To be Christian is to do Christ.

Christlikeness isn’t an exercise in the imagination. It is something we do because of who we are.

So, we ask: What might it mean to so be a Christian that what we “do” is “Christ”?

Those earliest Christian in Asia Minor, the Christians in the time of the apostles, were taunted by a pejorative name: “Little Christs” is what they were called, “Christians.” That’s how we got our name. That’s what it means. They were taunted until they took the name as a badge of honor. “Yes,” we’ll be called that. “Little Christs.” That’s what we are trying to do because of what we have become.

Two thousand years later, George MacLeod, that strange person of so many contradictions, the most

decorated British officer in the First World War who became a pacifist, an aristocrat who inherited a lordship who became a champion of the Labor party, a so-called man of the world who became a pastor to the poorest of the poor in urban Glasgow, a Christian evangelist who was also founder of the inter-faith Iona Community, this person whose internal compass guided his church through the turbulent fifties and sixties, perhaps said it best: “We are to be to others what Christ has become for us.”

If this peculiar grammar of faith is true, it makes sense of the title of Karl Barth’s little commentary of the Heidelberg Catechism translated by our own Shirley Guthrie: “Learning Jesus Christ.”

It has become fashionable again to reduce Jesus to a political revolutionary in order to make sense of his execution by the Romans. And, of course, there were Jewish revolutionaries who did attract Rome’s wrath, the most renowned of whom was Bar Kochba, who just a generation after Jesus so goaded Rome with his armed rebellion that Rome crushed the Jewish homeland, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and martyred hundreds. But even in the time of Bar Kochba, there were simple rabbis and rabbinical scholars who paid with their lives just for studying and teaching and living by the Torah, such as the legendary Akiva. This remarkable teacher, when faced by the Roman military leaders who were about to torture and murder him, smiled and said: All my life I have sought to love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind and possessions, and finally I am being given the chance to love the Lord with my soul.

Akiva’s final witness reminds me of Clarence Jordan, the preacher who founded the integrated Koinonia Farm Community in 1942 and inspired the Habitat for Humanity movement. Jordan once said, “Faith is not belief in spite of evidence but a life in scorn of consequences.”

“This do in remembrance of me.”

“Do this remembering me.”

And, so, our teacher, our Lord Jesus whom we believe to be the Christ, on the night before he was arrested “took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.’”

Do this.

Amen