

You all know the story of Moses and the burning bush. Moses was just walking along, when he noticed a bush that looked to him as if it were ablaze, yet, it was not burning up, in the way things normally burn. He stepped closer and all of a sudden realized that God was showing him something - right there through that ordinary bush. And so he took off his shoes, realizing that this seemingly average spot in the middle of the desert was holy ground. On this night when we remove our shoes in church, I always think about that passage.

When the disciples assembled in Jerusalem a few days before the annual Passover celebration, they needed to find somewhere to hold their regular Chaburah meal. For centuries, groups of Jews who were in community with each other – perhaps small Torah study groups or prayer groups – would gather together every week to share a meal. This was not the Shabbat, or Sabbath meal. It was not the Seder on Passover. But there would have been a Chaburah the day before every Sabbath or Holy Day. At the Chaburah dinner, the group would have their meeting, do their business, follow their agenda. Jesus and his disciples, as such a small group, would have put aside time every week for their own Chaburah meals in the homes of their supporters. Many of the meals described in the New Testament were likely to have been Chaburah meals.

What I'm trying to say is that a Chaburah meal was a very common and habitual occurrence in the life of the ancient Jews. And the members of every Chaburah group all knew the routine. They would gather for appetizers and wine and conversation. By their custom, anything eaten that was larger than an olive needed to receive a prayer of blessing before it was put into the mouth, and so the members of the group would say their own blessings over each of their foods and drinks during this beginning part of the gathering. When everyone had relaxed together for a while it was time to start the meal formally, and they would all "recline" together, since their tables were close to the ground, and the host of the evening would properly start everything off by blessing a loaf of bread with the words "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, eternal King, Who brings forth bread from the earth." Then the host would break off little pieces of the bread to give to everyone around the table. This action marked the beginning of the communal part of the meeting.

Toward the end of the meal and meeting, a servant would come around with a bowl of water so that all the guests could wash their hands and then the gathering would come to a close with a formal thanksgiving. On special days, this last thanksgiving would be said over a chalice of wine called the 'cup of blessing.' The host would give thanks, say a blessing to God, take a sip of this wine, and then pass the cup around the table so that everyone could each take a sip from the cup of blessing before heading off into the night.

Before I knew about the long and established tradition of Chaburah meals in ancient Israel, I used to think that Jesus had invented a whole new kind of ritual on that night of the last supper. I thought he created this strange ceremony of eating flesh and drinking blood out of the air – but I have come to understand that he did not start a whole new custom. He simply transformed something that would have been a very familiar and common practice into something new – something that illuminated God's presence in a strikingly new way for his followers – in the same way that God showed something new to Moses through an ordinary bush.

Paul, who was a Jew, writing to the Corinthians, also mostly Jewish, described the last supper very succinctly in only a few short sentences. He wrote:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed 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."

Paul simply says Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it. He didn't have to describe the words Jesus said, because any Jew would have known what the prayer of thanksgiving at a Chaburah meal would have been. But Paul

did note that Jesus added some new and different words of his own as he handed out pieces of the blessed bread, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Paul sees no need to describe what Jesus would have said when he prays over the cup of blessing after supper, either. His readers would have known exactly what he would have said. But again Paul notes the new and different words Jesus says as everyone is taking a sip, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Now the Greek word used for remembrance in this passage is anamnesis. This is not the same kind of remembering you do when you wistfully think back to something that happened long ago but hasn't happened since, as in, “I remember the great pie my Aunt Betty used to make.” Anamnesis is not like sentimental remembering but like a conjuring up, a bringing back - not only to your mind - but in your present experience. It is like re-living an experience all over again in yourself. Literally re-remembering – putting something back together and making it alive again. Anamnesis is the same word used in the passage from Exodus, where God tells the Jews to practice Passover every year as a day of re-remembrance. Not as a memorial of the past actions of old ancestors, but to conjure up among them and re-live once again the amazing experience of God's power and presence on that miraculous day in Egypt. Anamnesis or re-remembering brings the story alive in the here and now, making it something that is fully available to current and future generations.

Anamnesis is the word used for the last supper. Because Jesus calls us not to just do this ceremonial meal each Sunday as a commemoration – like a nice plaque on the wall that honors some great guy that lived and taught centuries ago, foreign and distant to us. No, he meant it in the same way that God meant it when he called his people to come together yearly to eat and pray in re-remembrance – bringing alive among them their intimate experience of God at Passover. Jesus was asking his disciples – then and now, to Re-remember the bond between them, Re-remember the community of love that he gave his life to build, to re-remember the body of Christ - to make it alive among us, within us and between us whenever we enact this ritual meal together. We, who are the body of Christ, come from all different places here to this table to re-remember Christ – to knit the body back together and re-mind ourselves, re-orient ourselves toward God's intimate love for us through Christ. Then Christ's body is broken again as we head off out into the world to love and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart, until we come together to re-remember once again.

At his last Chaburah meal, Jesus created a way for something familiar, regular and ordinary to represent and embody everything he had shown his disciples. And then at the point of the meal at which a servant would usually come around to wash everyone's hands, instead Jesus himself put a towel around his waist, and knelt down to the floor to wash their feet, in an act of profound humility and service. Peter couldn't imagine having his teacher, his mentor, his Lord, stoop to his feet and perform such a menial task. It was upside down – unthinkable. But Jesus responds, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Jesus knew that the rubber of a faithful life hits the road where things, like feet, get messy and dirty. When the task before us is difficult, confusing and does not follow the proper decorum. “I have set you an example,” Jesus says, “that you also should do as I have done to you. And I give you a new commandment, that you love one another – dirty feet and all. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Being a Christian is not a solitary faith – something we can do or master alone. It is made manifest only when we come together into one body. When we are able, as Christ, to love, heal and respect the bodies of each other.

And so we are called. To re-remember, re-create, re-vitalize the love Christ has for us every single week, and to pass it on to each other continuously – with and through our own bodies. May all know we are Christians by our love, by our love. May all see we are Christians by our love.