

Eucharist And Raspberry Jam – Judy Cox

Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Last month I heard, for the first time, of the Easter tradition of the lamb cake. Since our family is all about dessert, I of course asked for more details. So any white cake recipe works, baked in this special cake pan shaped like a lamb, frosted all over with fluffy white icing—with raspberry jam at the neck. My first reaction, to be truthful, was along the lines of “Eeewww!” Maybe yours too?

Today’s texts bring me back to explore, and confess, that same sort of distaste.

We’re with John the Revelator in the throne room of the universe. Just before today’s passage begins, John has seen the One seated on the throne holding a scroll, the book holding the destiny of the cosmos. He’s wept that no one is worthy to open it—and received comfort: *see, the Lion of the tribe of Judah ... has conquered, so that he can open the scroll!* But here in the seat of all power and might, when John looks, he sees not a fierce and powerful lion, but another image entirely. It is a Lamb, the portrayal of powerlessness and vulnerability. Vulnerability— thanks to the trending work of Brené Brown and others, that’s become America’s newest cool thing, even almost a “technique” to achieve our relationship goals.

The Revelator’s description doesn’t stop there, though. This Lamb standing among the elders appears *as if it had been slaughtered*...and we hear Handel’s Messiah echoing, “The Lamb **that was slain!**” The slain/slaughtered Lamb embodies SACRIFICIAL love, demonstrated to and through DEATH. Sacrifice. We’re beyond “vulnerable” all the way to “offensive,” and “weird and messy,” to borrow Pastor Niquita’s language from last week!

This Lamb takes the scroll, and angels and humans worship him, declaring his worth-ship; all creation joins in singing praise to the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb. With the Revelator we see that not power, but sacrificial love, most expresses God’s reign and God’s self. The Lamb who has been slain, and raised, redefines the Kingdom’s victory. Victory comes, in our world, to those who do the slaying, or sometimes to those who manage to duck and run the fastest, and avoid the slaughter. But in the throne room of God’s eternal Kingdom it is precisely the wounded, slaughtered Lamb as Victor who receives blessing and honor and glory and might, with the Father Whom he reveals, forever and ever. And all God’s people join their voices with the four living creatures and say, “Amen!”...

After all, Jesus died for us, in our place, right? So isn’t escaping the slaughter, avoiding our death, what the Kingdom of God must be about too?

Does today’s greeting that we just read, “Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die,” mean THAT?

“My debt he paid, and my death he died,” go the lyrics of Graham Kendrick’s “Amazing Love.” And in our red hymnal’s Communion liturgy we hear that Jesus “suffer[ed] death upon the cross for our redemption... by his sacrifice, offered once for all...” Is that once and done then?

Every Sunday we celebrate: “By dying, Christ destroyed our death.” So ... we’re off the hook? It’s the Easter Season, shouldn’t we get over that death stuff and focus on the Resurrection, Christ’s and ours, instead? Well, yes ... Yes, and...

What DOES it mean, that we follow this Lamb-who-was-slaughtered? Today’s other passages show us some more uncomfortable implications.

In our Gospel text, the disciples have gone fishing. Their unproductive fishing turns wildly productive at Jesus’ direction, although at first they don’t recognize him. After failing in their own strength, all night long, they accept his invitation to try again, try his way. Now they net a catch larger than they can handle.

The intuitive Beloved Disciple recognizes this unknown on the beach as Jesus. But it is Peter, with his trademark “ready-fire-aim,” who jumps into the sea to go to him.

On the beach they find a charcoal fire that hints of another charcoal fire, back in the high priest’s courtyard during Jesus’ trial. Here Jesus has prepared a breakfast of bread and fish. We remember another meal of loaves and fishes, from John 6, with its intentional depicting of the Communion Meal. In Syrian Christianity, in fact, the early Eucharist was bread and fish, not bread and cup! The wording makes it clear: Jesus TAKES, and GIVES, first bread, then fish.

Then Jesus and Peter take a walk. Just like Thomas, Peter receives from Jesus what he uniquely needs. With the scent of burning charcoal lingering in their clothes, Jesus 3 times questions him, as he 3 times had denied Jesus. Jesus asks not about his courage, strength, or faith, but about his love. (Whether the varying words for love have meaning, we can’t tell; the text seems to imply simply that Jesus asks the same thing three times.) In this three-part questioning, Jesus exposes the festering wounds of failure and shame to his healing light, and restores Peter.

And notice the Spirit-breathed vulnerability of Peter now: he doesn’t claim to love Jesus *more than these*. (More than he loves the other disciples? More than he loves all the trappings of his profession of fishing? Or my favorite, given what we’ve seen of Peter: more than these other disciples love Jesus?) He humbly says, repeatedly and grievingly, “You know, Lord.” His eyes finally aren’t on himself at all, but on Jesus.

This is Peter’s commissioning: the Good Shepherd, Who laid down his life for his sheep, deputizes another shepherd to tend and love the sheep sacrificially, even to lay down his own life. “The rewards won’t be what you might have hoped, Peter—you used to be in control, and now you won’t be. There’s suffering and death for you ahead, if you accept this invitation.” And NOW, for the first time in this gospel, having restored and commissioned Peter to a life of sacrificial love, Jesus says to him: *Follow Me!* Church tradition tells us how well, how sacrificially Peter followed Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus the Lamb that was slain—to *the point of death, even death on a cross*.

We are invited to read ourselves into this story, as we hear ourselves called to follow. Can we number ourselves with Peter as followers to the point of death, or does this death talk make us squeamish? What does this call by the Crucified One mean for our lives?

Saul resembles Thomas in last week's gospel lesson. Like Thomas, Saul receives what he needs in order to believe in Jesus. Yikes! Flat on his face and blinded by the light, he has never been so out of control! All he knows is the next step: *get up and enter the city...and you will be told what you are to do*. Dependent as never before, only with help can he obey.

What about Ananias, sent to out himself as a follower of Jesus, to pray for this man described as *breathing ... murder against the disciples of the Lord*? Directed by Jesus, in a vision, to do this, he questions this apparent courting of death: "Are you SURE, Jesus?!? Can I just explain what's going on here?" Jesus IS sure; he has chosen Saul as his instrument, to bear his Name. Not to carry that Name triumphantly—Jesus speaks not of triumph but of suffering for his Name.

Jesus says again, "Go." Ananias goes. After that obedient (and probably trembling!) prayer, Saul immediately sees, and is baptized. Then HE joins himself to the fellowship of the disciples, and begins to proclaim Jesus in the very synagogues he had planned to purge of the Jesus-followers! He too walks into danger and death obediently, bringing Jesus' name *before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel*. He lives what he later describes in 2nd Corinthians: *while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh*.

By now we're seeing ourselves in this story. The psalmist gives us words to name our self-sufficiency, our own complacent variations on, "*I shall never be moved*." We're also falling short, needing our own remedial sessions with Jesus. We resemble Peter and Paul most of all in their back stories: Peter's cocky Last Supper boast, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!"; the prideful certainty of Saul, off to Damascus to protect the faith from these dangerous Christ-followers of the Way. We confess how little we like the pattern that we see emerging with Paul, and Ananias, and Peter. Full of ourselves like them, we too need a death to sin and a death to self. As Bonhoeffer bluntly puts it, and we'd rather avoid, in calling us to follow, Jesus the Slaughtered Lamb calls us, too, to COME AND DIE. ...

With Peter, and Paul-formerly-known-as-Saul, we worship the Lamb who was slaughtered, but fall short of His sacrificial love. We confess our failure at this in our own strength, along with those disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. We CAN'T give up control, emptying ourselves, to love and give ourselves sacrificially! We need the life of Jesus, and the death of Jesus, in our mortal flesh—and this is just what we're offered in the Meal Christ offers Peter, and us.

Pastor and editor Adam Hearlson, pondering the "holy pursuit of meaning" that cooking can be, observes: "Dinner ... is a deeply vulnerable medium. It is dangerous to share the food that tells your people's story... [R]ejecting a food as too stinky, too salty, too bland, or too funky [is] to make a judgement on the people who produced the food." That offer, that gift, he calls a "holy and sacred thing."

And I'm thinking about the raspberry jam on the Lamb cake... and my involuntary, "Eeewww"... How much might that distaste actually mirror our reactions to the slaughtered, slain Lamb? In the upside-down Kingdom of God he mysteriously, even offensively, embodies the powerful Lion. The Food Christ offers us at his Table, this holy and sacred thing, tells his story, Meal after Meal. Do we make a judgement on the One producing this food, rejecting it as

too... too what? Too bloody? Too much death? Too much call on us to be conformed fully to him, to PARTICIPATE, not only in his resurrection, but in his SUFFERING AND DEATH?

Hear now again the words we've been praying the past few weeks, coming to the Meal offered us by the Lamb: "Send the power of Your Holy Spirit upon us, that we may EXPERIENCE anew the SUFFERING, DEATH and resurrection of Your Son, Jesus Christ" (emphasis added). We need the power of the Holy Spirit to give us courage even to pray that prayer! Perhaps we need to join Peter in honestly declaring our feeble love, and our need—you know, Lord!

Today will you accept the Lamb's invitation to the holy and sacred Meal he IS for us, to enter into his death as well as his life? ... That invitation comes with another; with it you're being recruited for a concert, to sing with *myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands ... with full voice*, "*Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*"