



Food for the Journey

29 March 2015: Palm/Passion Sunday (Year B)
First United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX
“Welcoming Others on the Journey”
Preaching Text: Mark 15:42-47

“That’s the secret of entertaining. You make your guests feel welcome and at home.
If you do that honestly, the rest takes care of itself”
(Barbara Hall, Northern Exposure, Northern Hospitality, 1994).

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As we prepare to read our lesson for the day, Mark 15:42-47 we try to put our text into context. As you remember: “All of them deserted him and fled” and Jesus quotes the prophet to them “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered’ ” were the sad words of Jesus. By the time we arrive at this text these words had come true. Jesus was dead on the cross. Jesus’ opponents were confident that they had put an end to Jesus and his rabble-rousing. As we read the story we know that even Jesus’ friends thought that this was the close of the story.

A few women who had remained near the cross were dedicated to the end. Their faith was firm and yet their question became “what could they do to obtain Jesus’ body and give it proper burial?” Perhaps they feared someone might fling Jesus’ remains into the first grave that came along.

Into this uncertain circumstance, Joseph of Arimathea abruptly appeared. Of course the Gospel writers share little about him. Yet he was the person needed for a moment such as this. What do we know about this Joseph of Arimathea? He was a person of power and possessed influence persuasive with Pilate—important as it turns out. Joseph of Arimathea was not only wealthy; he was also something of a counselor and a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He had both consequence and honor. Each of the four Evangelists mentions him and each tells us something about him. From Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we learn that Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple, “a good man and just; who also, himself, waited for the kingdom of God.”

Perhaps some might say that Joseph prior to this moment of stepping up and retrieving Jesus' body had been weak and perhaps even cowardly. Yet now he came to the cross and saw how the plot against Jesus continued to unfold. Joseph indeed saw the whole sordid business unravel. Then . . . he went in boldness to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body—and Pilate gave it to him. Hear our lesson:

42 When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

44 Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid (Mark 15:42-47).

Jesus invited Joseph of Arimathea on a journey of a lifetime and for whatever reason Joseph declined. We do not know why, but later when all the real disciples abandoned Jesus—just as Jesus predicted, both Nicodemus (John 19:39) and Joseph of Arimathea come to the fore and offered Jesus in death what they could not or would not offer him in life. Joseph donated and ultimately housed Jesus' body in a tomb that Joseph earlier got for himself. It was a lovely act of hospitality and a superb spiritual discipline. We all need to know more about this Christian/spiritual discipline.

I learned about Liberian hospitality in the late 1970s. Liberia is a nation that has existed at the poverty level for many years, even as in 1847 it became the first African democracy. I understand that Liberia's unemployment rate sits at 85%. Yet my year in Liberia richly taught me about the stewardship of hospitality and welcome.

When my African students took me to preach at their “bush churches,” the people

received us foreigners as royalty. Each village hut expected us to dine inside—and sumptuously! I have never eaten so much food in my life. These blessed people offered us much, yet possessed little. Even with little to share, the gifts of hospitality and welcome were always ready at hand.

When we traveled in the county we had to stay with people along the way. We slept in their homes and ate at their tables. We did this because there were no hotels, motels, or hostels in the interior regions of Liberia. Many people do not know the joy of sharing hospitality with people in their homes because we usually stay at motels for convenience sake. Yet, hospitality extended to missionaries in Liberia is a rare but necessary offering. It allows people to know each other much better than the artificial atmosphere sometimes set up by hotel lodging.

In a peculiar way, Joseph grasped hospitality and offered to place Jesus in his own tomb. Of course, the irony is that Jesus did not need the tomb long. Thus Joseph collected his hospitality back in excess and in overflow.

To be hospitable is to recognize that when we were strangers others took us in—and we received grace upon grace in the exchange. May we now receive the Lord's hospitality at the table. Amen.