

Remember, Restore, Renew
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Exodus 12:1-14, Romans 13:8-14

Do you recall the movie *Babette's Feast*? I'm pretty sure that we watched it on a woman's retreat once upon a time. It is a beautiful film in which a poor French cook named (you guessed it, Babette) finds herself on a desolate peninsula. We learn that the local townsfolk she encounters have been greatly influenced by their beloved minister, who died some years before Babette arrives on the scene.

Babette has been buying lottery tickets with the little money she makes, and eventually, word gets back to her that she has won some ten thousand francs (that's \$10,965 US dollars)! What joy!

As it turns out, the anniversary of the minister's death is about to be celebrated, and his daughters plan the celebration, which ordinarily would have been a pretty humble and drab affair.

That's when Babette steps in and asks if she can prepare the food for the feast. Until then, Babette had been directed to make the minister's prescribed menu for the community: hard, crusty brown bread and fish soup. But now, with her unexpected and newfound wealth, Babette decides that she is going to fix a culinary masterpiece. She sends off for tasty, high-end ingredients: fancy cheeses and wine, all manner of edible fowl, vegetables, and specialty items that the villagers have either never seen or long ago forgotten.

Babette gets to work, and many of the townsfolk think she must be some sort of witch, with all those pots and kettles going! But there's this nagging feeling among the villagers that the memory of their beloved minister would somehow be offended at the extravagance, and they decide that they will not enjoy the delicious food at the feast. After all, it would just spoil what they are supposed to be feeling, which is grief and sorrow.

Once at the event itself, it turns out that Babette's cooking transforms the villagers. Never before have they tasted anything like this! Before long, their sadness has turned to joy. Their entire lives are changed by the meal, and they realize that this is a moment of joy they will remember it for the rest of their lives!

I think of Babette's Feast when I think of the meal we'll celebrate today – in these tiny, covid-safe, sanitized cups.

As the story is told, Jesus was celebrating the Jewish feast of Passover that night in the upper room.

It is customary for a people being delivered to REMEMBER and celebrate their freedom. In the beginning, when celebrating Passover, the men around the table were to hold their walking sticks in their hand, everyone was expected to have shoes on, as though preparing at any moment to leave. No kicking off your shoes and relaxing! The bread that accompanied the meal was to be unleavened, emphasizing the urgency of what was about to happen.

Try to imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites that first Passover night in Egypt, when they were unaware of how the story might end. It must have been terrifying. In our own lives, in those moments of greatest fear and uncertainty, what a difference it can make to muster up the imagination of a future day when we will remember this moment as pivotal for our survival and flourishing.

Over thousands of years, this ritual meal was perpetuated, until the story of deliverance was woven into the fabric of what it meant to be a faithful Jew. And it's a celebration that still takes place in many Jewish homes and synagogues today. Perhaps nowadays the story is told with a little less urgency, with family members reclining on cushions instead of preparing to make a run for it.

Now imagine what Passover must have been like when Jesus took the bread and cup of this ritual feast and changed its meaning for all who would follow him. The unleavened bread that was supposed to remind them of the hardship and loss, the quick retreat from Egypt, the gift of unexpected manna in the wilderness became the bread of life. Imagine the wondering eyes of the disciples as Jesus might well have taken up the cup of wine reserved for the prophet Elijah during the Passover celebration, changing its meaning as well: simple bread and fruit of the vine – symbols of the RESTORATION that is to come, shared in remembrance of their teacher and friend.

It's important to remember that those earliest followers of Jesus were not busy trying to heroically create scripture we could look to today for comfort and strength. Instead, they were simply struggling together to figure out what it meant to follow Christ – again and again, RENEWING their hearts and minds for the road ahead.

Those first disciples, and the ones who followed them, did not know how things were going to work out. When we are honest, we know that things don't always work out for us the way we think they should, either! In those disorienting moments, it gives me hope to know that I am in some good and faithful company.

If we imagine ourselves to be time travelers to first century Christianity, we would not encounter Renaissance paintings of saints. Instead, we would encounter groups of imperfect people who hurt one another, people who were trying to resolve conflict in healthy ways, people who needed to be held accountable. We would encounter people who are more like us than we think. What a treasure to have these early Christian documents that help us to feel that connection through time!

Let's dwell in the sacred empathy that our ancestors express to us through these many generations. Remember. Restore. Renew. This week, let's all just take a breath and try to see where the Spirit is leading us on the journey, as we dance at the feast. Amen.