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“If You Love Me, Seder Me”

**A sermon by
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Psalm 8; Hebrews 5:1–10; Mark 10:35–45

We all know what a Seder is, don't we?

Seder is the traditional Jewish feast, the ritual home meal,
that marks the beginning of the Jewish celebration of the Passover.

Seder is a re-enactment of the salvation of the children of God
from Egyptian oppressors, by eating the same fast foods
and saying the same hurried prayers

of their ancestors on the night before their pack-and-go exodus
toward the turbulent uncertainty of the Red Sea waters.

Seder, the Hebrew word, means “order” because it is an orderly account
of historical moments interrupted and orchestrated by Yahweh
to save God's chosen people.

Seder is a dialogue: a time for children and adults to pose
frequently-asked-questions about the Passover and the history
of God's on-going relationship with Israel.

It's an opportunity to pass the faith from one generation to the next.

At the Seder meal, as the family gathers around the table at sundown
the youngest child asks four questions, beginning with:

“Why is this night different than other nights?”

Followed by: “Why the unleavened bread and bitter herbs?”

“Why the salty water for dipping, twice?”

“Why the open doors?”

And the child’s questions solicit gentle answers from their elders

in the form of a story: the story of Yahweh’s love for Israel,

the story of Yahweh’s promise to the children of Abraham,

to make their name great,

to swell their numbers like the starry multitude,

to give them a honeyed-land in which they might prosper,

to bless them and to bless all peoples of the earth

through them;

AND in their cries of distress, to deliver them from

from slavery to liberation,

from oppression to beloved possession.

Seder is a face-to-face encounter, where the essence of the faith

is passed on from generation to generation.

Seder is a noun.

But I want us to be creative and to consider Seder as a verb.

And I want us to think of it in this way:

Seder – *v. to bring understanding to faith, by answering questions, even child-like questions, through face-to-face dialogue, in a loving and patient manner.*

I want us to consider Seder as a verb, because Jesus would have been

rooted in Seder as a Jewish rabbi,

and because I think that’s how Jesus passes the faith

to those closest to him: He seders them.

“Can we sit next to you in the Kingdom?” James and John boldly ask Jesus.

James and John are not children, but their request is certainly child-like.

With the twelve gathered round, James and John get the jump on others,

and ask Jesus for preferred seating in the next arena.

After all, they are part of his inner circle, his closest friends in ministry.

They were with him on the mountaintop at his Transfiguration,
when three shelters were suggested impulsively by Peter.
Why shouldn't they now one-up Peter and reserve the most prestigious
and exclusive seats for themselves, to the right and left of Jesus?
Why wait for the shove-fest when the music stops and all of the
disciples rush for the musical chairs of honor in the next life?
Jesus has shared with them three times now,
that his betrayal, condemnation, suffering and death,
are necessary and immanent, before he rises from it all,
but they are obtuse to the implications of his teaching.
Jesus has used the example of a child two times now,
to teach them an important aspect of kingdom life:
that it involves a child-like sense of wonder and trust.
In one case, he chides the disciples for rebuffing
those bringing children near him, to touch, bless and heal.
In another, he pulls a child into the disciples' midst and
makes a clear correlation:
"Whoever welcomes this one; welcome me."
The antithesis goes unspoken.

And now, when his closest disciples act like children themselves,
Jesus doesn't rebuke or chide them for their request;
he doesn't berate or belittle them;
he doesn't reject them for failing to understand
the radical nature of discipleship,
or the divinely mandated cost of his rescue mission.
When the disciples only voice what is on the minds of others,
namely preferential treatment, Jesus seders them.
He patiently instructs them, face-to-face, that their desire for greatness
is about to be turned on its head;

that the way of faith through him will be drastically different

from the way of success that the world practices;

that the world's high road to glory

by means of grabbing, getting and gaining,

will have to be circumvented by faith's low road

that passes through the modest one-horse towns

of service, servant-hood, slavery, and sacrifice.

Jesus seders them gently.

Jesus seders them in the great tradition of Judaism,

which honors any question, and considers no question to be inappropriate

or out of place.

Jesus seders them in the great tradition of the psalmists,

who are never unafraid to ask the tough question:

How long, O Lord, will you forget me?

Why do the nations rage, and people plot in vain?

What are human beings that you are mindful of them?

Mortals, that you care for them?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus seders them in the great tradition of Yahweh God,

who honors all questions, because God honors all questioners.

Jesus seders them with signs of grace that are visible and tangible –

the paradoxical overflowing cup and the cleansing water of baptism,

in the midst of seemingly dire pronouncements.

Jesus seders them in order to deliver them

through the murky waters of misunderstanding

and the chaotic waters of his and their difficult journey ahead.

Jesus seders them, because he loves them, as God loves them.

Recently, a headline in *The New York Times* caught my eye:

"From Birth, Engage Your Child With Talk".

The article opens with the image of a mother pushing a child in a stroller,
walking through a park, asking questions along the way:

What color are those flowers?

Do you see the birds? How many do you see?

Can you count them?

I see a horse, do you? What does the horse say?

I remember those days with my own children, and quite frankly,
I miss them.

I miss our meandering inquisitive walks through the neighborhood
where we called every dog by name
and knew what kind of dog it was.

I miss our stop-and-go road trips to any destination, where my boys knew
the name of every moving vehicle that was passed:
fire truck, backhoe, ditch-witch, cherry-picker,
dump truck, bulldozer, steamroller, taxi.

And I especially miss the opera of the grocery store,
where we wheeled down the aisles singing silly songs about
every vegetable which we handled, smelled,
examined, named, and rhymed.

I miss the seders of the park, the seders of the road,
the seders of the grocery store, where every question was entertained,
and no question was considered to be out of bounds.

And I miss the seders of theological inquiry, that usually occurred
around our kitchen table.

Why does Jesus eat little pieces of bread?

Why does Jesus pour juice like this?

Why don't we say a blessing at the end of the meal?

How much money does God want me to put in the offering plate?

According to *The New York Times* article, these Q &A vocal outings
are becoming rare occurrences.

"All too often, the mothers and nannies I see are tuned in to their cellphones, BlackBerrys and iPods, not their young children," the author notes.

"I'm not the only one alarmed by modern parental behavior" she continues.

"...A speech and language specialist in New York recently said,

'Parents have stopped having good communications with their young children, causing them to lose out on eye contact, facial expression and overall feedback that is essential for early communication development.'"

"Young children require time and one-on-one feedback as they struggle to formulate utterances in order to build their language and cognitive skills.

The most basic skills are not being taught by example, and society is falling prey to the quick response that our computer generation has become accustomed to."

(Jane Brody. "From Birth, Engage Your Child With Talk." *The New York Times*. 10/4/09)

The corrective, the article suggests, is to put down the cellphone, the BlackBerry, the iPod, look a child squarely in the eye, and share your thoughts with him or her.

In other words... sedate them. Encourage their questions.

Entertain their questions. Ask them questions of your own.

Allow them to be the expert sometimes. Tell them a story, and tell it over and over again.

"Talk is cheap...What a mercy," says columnist Ruth Walker.

"Even poor families can afford to provide their children something that is arguably key to lifting them out of poverty and into middle class success: a torrent of words.

One of the biggest difference between poor families in America and their middle and upper class counterparts, research has shown,

is the dearth of language in the former
and the abundance of it in the latter.

Specifically, a study done in Kansas City in the 1980's found that
a middle class child is likely to have heard, by age 3,
20 million more words than a poor child."

(Ruth Walker. "Talk Is Cheap". *The Christian Science Monitor*. 9/27/09)

That is important for us to hear in Durham County,
where our child poverty rate for those ages 0-5 is now 23%!
Talk is cheap! Seder them.

Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor says that at its most basic level
"the everyday practice of being with other people
is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self.

More intricately, it is the practice of coming face-to-face
with another human being, preferably someone different enough
to qualify as a capital "O" Other –
and at least entraining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God."

(Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar In the World*. p. 94)

That would apply to adults, and to children, I think.

Jesus modeled the practice of encounter.

He taught it not only by what he said, but also by what he did.

"Watch how this rabbi practices what he preaches," she says,

"and you will notice that his teaching is not limited
to people who look, act, or think like him.

He does the same eye-to-eye thing with Roman centurions, Samaritan lepers,
Syro-Phoenician women, and hostile Judeans that he does with his own
Galilean disciples.

He does it with slaves and rulers, twelve-year-old girls and powerful men,
people who can be useful to him and people who cannot.

With the possible example of his own family, no one is dismissed
from his circle of concern, for no one made in God's image
is negligible in the revelation of that same God." (Brown Taylor, p. 96)

Jesus seders them.

He engages them in conversation.

He entertains their wildest questions.

He asks a few of their own.

He talks to them face to face.

He seders them, because he loves them, because God loves them.

"What are human beings, that You are mindful of them?

Mortals that you care for them," the Psalmist asks.

If we love our children, we will seder them, because they are

created in God's image, but a little lower, yet still crowned
with glory and honor.

And if we love ourselves and our neighbors even when we act like children,
we will seder one another, face to face,

because each person has been created in God's image,
but a little lower, yet still crowned with glory and honor.

Why is this day different than any other day?

Because this is the Lord's Day, the day of Resurrection,
when Jesus became for all of God's children
the Way to glory and honor. Amen.