

MAUNDY THURSDAY

March 29, 2018

INTRODUCTION

If Maundy Thursday fell on Sunday it's more likely that more people would be here to appreciate the rich meaning, significance, and faith-building importance of this unique day in this unique week of the church year. This is a week in which time slows down for Christians. It is, in some ways, repetitive, but it is repetitive because of the importance of the events we re-live during these days from Passion or Palm Sunday through the Resurrection of our Lord on Easter morning. During the rest of the church year we cram about thirty-three years of Jesus' life and ministry into the twelve months from Advent to Christ the King Sunday. During Holy Week, though, we live each day in real time, from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to his last meal with his disciples. Then we gather at the foot of the cross on that darkest of days known as Good Friday, we wait with anxious anticipation through Saturday, and finally rejoice with the women at the empty tomb on Sunday morning. If we attend all the services, which are actually designed to be one continuous service from Sunday through Sunday, we hear some parts of the story more than once. We learn about these most vital events of the Christian faith from different perspectives and different writers, all in order to help us appreciate the wonder and mystery of the Son of God willingly suffering and dying for our sake and the joy and promise of knowing that because he rose from that sacrificial death and overcame the power of sin once and for all, because he lives, we shall live also; saved by grace through faith to live forever with our Lord.

GOSPEL John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In this first part of the Gospel reading for Maundy Thursday, we hear the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Footwashing, while common practice in Jesus' day, is foreign to us. It's strange, it's odd, it's weird, and its unfamiliarity, unfortunately, often makes it more of a spectacle than a meaningful symbol. Footwashing would be truly meaningful if everybody here washed, and had their feet washed, by everybody else. How many of you would like to try that? Just imagining doing it yourself should give you a great appreciation for the way Jesus was willing to humble himself in service to others. We have at times seen videos or dramas that show the story of Jesus' humble service to his disciples at their last meal together, but I'm afraid it can be easy to see the show and miss the story. As we read the story, as we hear the story, as we picture the story in our minds' eyes and ponder the significance of the Savior of the world, the Messiah, the Son of God, doing the work of a slave, there is nothing we can do to make that story any more significant, relevant, or heart rending than it already is in all its simplicity.

A primary image for Maundy Thursday is the servant. We recall from Passion Sunday's Servant Song that the image of servant is not an easily recognizable symbol in today's society. John's gospel offers us a lowly, even dirty, task as appropriate for a true servant.

GOSPEL Part B John 13:31-35

Now we join Jesus and his disciples at their last meal together before he goes to the cross. John's gospel is the only one in which Jesus does not institute the Lord's supper at his last Passover meal with the disciples.

At John's last supper Jesus gives himself to them in a different way. Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet is an enactment of his witness to the dominion of God: the first will be last; the lowly will be lifted up; whoever loves their life will lose it. This act of self-sacrifice, one which prefigures his death on the cross, is a living example of Jesus' counter cultural definition of love, one which he passes on to the twelve and to us. Washed by Jesus in our baptisms, we too are blessed with and challenged by God's love in Christ and the command to share that sacrificial love with the whole world. The title for Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin word Mandatum, which means command. It is on this day that we hear Jesus leave his disciples, and us, with what he calls a new commandment, that we love one another as he loves us. The commandment to love one another is not new, it goes all the way back to Old Testament times, but there is something new about the commandment as Jesus gives it. Jesus' command today to love one another is not about having good feelings for each other or being "nice." Jesus tells his disciples that they are to love one another "just as I have loved you." By this definition, love means compassion, mercy, and plenty of hard work. As we see in today's gospel, Jesus' love is active in service and, ultimately, sacrifice. All we need is love, but to love as Jesus loves is no easy thing.

Jesus' love is inclusive, not meant only for the inner circle. Taken in the context of Jesus' teaching and ministry, his love, and the love he has in mind for us, is offered to all of humanity and, in fact, all of God's creation. The world will know that the church follows Jesus not only by our behavior within our own community, but also as we relate to the world. To love as Jesus loved is to cross boundaries, to stand with the lowliest among us, and to challenge the accepted ways in which the world does business.

FIRST READING: Exodus 12:1-14

We are reminded each year on Maundy Thursday that our celebration of the Lord's Supper is forever tied to the promises God made to the Hebrews while they were still slaves in Egypt. The first Passover, as described in Exodus 12:1-14, seals Israel's covenant with God. The Lord is their only God, and they are God's chosen people. Both parties participate in this promise—the Hebrews by placing blood on their doorways, and the Lord by sparing the people from the angel of death. A commemoration of this meal is celebrated on a regular basis at Passover, as a reminder of the relationship between God and the people. The exodus story tells of a binding and lasting covenant. Without negating that original covenant, Christians have added to the meaning of the Passover observance, by celebrating another meal as our binding and lasting covenant with the Lord. Communion is the sacrament for Christians that seals our covenant with God. We participate in the celebration by bringing bread and wine to the table, and God responds with the promise of forgiveness and salvation. The sacrament of communion is historically tied to Passover, as it was the reason for Jesus and his disciples to be in Jerusalem sharing a meal together the night before he was arrested. It is theologically tied to Passover as the symbolic meal, celebrated regularly, that reminds us of our covenant with God.

Most second-century Christians continued to keep the Jewish Passover. Over the decades, the celebration moved from the date of Pesach to the following Sunday, because the primary focus had morphed from a memorial of God's liberation of the ancient Israelites into Christian praise for Jesus' resurrection, which is always celebrated on a Sunday. At the Seder meal of Passover still today, Jews tell the story of Exodus 12.

Christians remember the old Passover as a parallel to the new Passover. Over the Three Days we keep the Christian Passover: Jesus is the lamb whose blood saves the people from death.

SECOND READING: First Corinthians 11:23-26

We hear from Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth, how Jesus' last Supper was, for his followers, the First Holy Communion. He was writing to a church that was, in many ways conflicted. He was chastising them for abuses of the Lord's Supper. They were not inclusive, they were not discerning of their own need for the forgiveness that Jesus promises through the offering of his body and blood. As we receive Holy Communion this evening have heard about the promise Jesus makes to us in this sacrament and we have been assured that that promise is real and realized every time we come to the table to receive the real presence of Jesus Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine.

Martin Luther once said, "Here stands the gracious and lovely words "This is my body given FOR YOU, this is my blood shed FOR YOU for the forgiveness of sins These words are not preached to wood or stone", Luther says, "but to you and me; otherwise Jesus might have just as well kept quiet and not instituted a Sacrament." Tonight, we receive the tangible elements of the love that has sustained us and will sustain us throughout their life of faith.

CONCLUSION

The readings for Maundy Thursday are filled with images of the body: the body of the Passover lamb, cooked and eaten; the body of Christ, shared in the bread; the body of the disciples, feet. For people who like to keep their individual space, it can be uncomfortable to share another's body in this public way.

The first reading says that it is the lamb's blood that reminds God not to punish the Israelites, and Paul says that the wine is a new covenant in Jesus' blood. In the ancient world, life was seen as residing in the blood. Thus, pouring out of blood is giving up of life. Jesus poured out his blood to save our life.

In all three readings, the people of God experience themselves as a meal community. Humans must eat to live, and humans eat together to become and maintain community. The Israelites are to keep the Passover meal "as a perpetual ordinance"; Paul assumes and corrects the meal practice of the Corinthians; John describes the last loving meal Jesus had with his disciples before his arrest. So it is, that over the centuries, most Christian assemblies have shared a meal at their weekly meeting. The liturgy of the Three Days continues with this meal.

With so much wrapped up in the celebration of Maundy Thursday, you can see why I say it's a shame it doesn't fall on Sunday so more people would come to appreciate it. But YOU ARE here. You have heard the story. You have learned the rich significance of this day and this week for people of Christian faith. We will leave here in silence this evening, but you don't have to remain silent about what you have heard, what you have learned, what you have felt and the experience you have had. Share the story, spread the word. We cannot fully appreciate the wonder and joy of the resurrection unless we first come to appreciate the love and sacrifice of The Great Three Days. Amen.