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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Holy Thursday, April 14, 2022

Holy Thursday /Year C

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-14

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Gospel Reading: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Sermon Title: “Do As I Have Done to You”

Theme

This evening our Lenten observance comes to an end, and we gather with Christians around the world to celebrate the Three Days of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Tonight we remember Christ’s last meal with his disciples, but the central focus is his commandment that we live out the promise embodied in this meal. As Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, so we are called to give and receive love in humble service to one another. Formed into a new body in Christ through this holy meal, we are transformed by the mercy we have received and carry it into the world. Departing worship in solemn silence, we anticipate the coming days.

Text

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

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

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel

around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

^{31b}"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Sermon

I love Holy Thursday. It is my favorite event on the liturgical calendar. And the reason is that even though Jesus knew what was about to happen to him, and had the power and authority to prevent it, he did not – he went on. He was obedient to his Heavenly Father's agenda, and his obedience was the only way sinful human beings could be saved. Because of his great love for his Heavenly Father and for us, his creation, he did what only he could do, and because he did, our earned sentence to hell is canceled.

Tonight is more commonly called Maundy Thursday from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning "commandment." And that refers back to his last "new commandment." He said to his disciples:

³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I prefer the name "Holy Thursday" because that name is more encompassing. Though John alone didn't mention it in his gospel rendering of the evening, in the Second Reading, Paul told us how Jesus used the Passover seder, his Last Supper with his closest friends and disciples, to institute a new ritual that the church has called Holy Communion. However, the church also calls Holy Communion a mystery of the faith, which ironically has led to a lot of confusion and disunity among the church, even within the ELCA. Allow me to give you an example.

When I was a child, my First Communion was the day I was confirmed. The thinking back then was that during our study of the catechism, we would get the necessary training and knowledge about what was going on in this mystery we call Holy Communion. Years later, after the three Lutheran church bodies merged to form the ELCA, it was left up to the individual churches to figure it out although the general trend was to separate First Communion from Confirmation and move First Communion to the third grade. However, several churches had no age of admission to Holy Communion at all.

Well before I became their pastor, the little church up north, Prince of Peace in Cortland, practiced "Infant Communion." It's a misnomer. I have never

communed an infant. The name refers to the idea that no member of the Christian church is denied access to Christ's table of grace, and especially not denied because of their age, after all, who among us understands what the church calls "a mystery of the faith"?

There was no "First Communion" education and I thought that was a problem, so I started an event that I called the Holy Thursday Children's experience, to be my "First Communion" education. The nice thing about it is that it doesn't have to be a one-and-done kind of experience, but can be repeated again and again as long as the child is interested. I brought that same event here and for several years it was a big success. But then COVID-19 happened during Lent of 2020 and now it has been three years since I've hosted the Holy Thursday Children's Experience.

Holy Communion is one of only two sacraments that are celebrated in the Lutheran tradition. The other is Holy Baptism. A sacrament is defined as:

Earthly elements are used according to God's command and connected with God's word.

In Holy Communion, the earthly elements are bread and wine, products made from the produce of the earth, and made holy as the body and blood of Christ by Jesus' own words. Lutherans believe that because Jesus said, "this is my body" referring to the bread, and "this is my blood" referring to the wine, he wasn't speaking metaphorically or symbolically. Lutherans believe that when Christ says those words, albeit, through the mouths of the ordained, *it is* the body and blood of Christ.

Just to be clear, I don't have any special power through ordination to change those elements into the body and blood of Christ. God does it and how God does it is the mystery. But we must believe it in faith. And more than simply believe it in faith, we are commanded to share in it, just as the twelve did on that night. Simply eating and drinking whatever is put before us, even by the command of Christ, is not enough. We must believe that *it is* the body and blood of Christ and willingly consume it at his command, because if Jesus is truly present in the elements of bread and wine, then we can believe this sacrament is effective in giving us the things Jesus promised – namely, forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Holy Communion is all about getting together, hearing the story, and remembering God's great love for us in that while we were still lost in our sinfulness God reached down and saved us through his son Jesus Christ, our Lord

For being so central to the Christian faith, Holy Communion has a bit of an identity crisis. Is it an act of remembering Jesus the person? A magic meal? Sometimes we're not even sure what to call it: The Lord's Supper? The Eucharist? Holy Communion? The Sacrament of the Altar? It's all very messy – just like a great dinner.

Jesus commanded his disciples to take and eat and drink the bread and wine and to "do this in remembrance of me" But the sacrament of Holy Communion is not just a way of remembering Jesus and his sacrifice - if that were the case, it would be something *we do*, a work, but it's really something God in Christ does. Instead, when we come together in what can well be described as communion (that is fellowship or community), we're uniting as the body of Christ to recall and receive God's promise to us.

A good, albeit necessarily incomplete understanding of communion, comes from that distinction – God in Christ is the one at work in Holy Communion, not us. We're not sacrificing Jesus again every time we share this meal. We're not doing magic to turn bread into flesh. Instead, God, in Jesus Christ, has already done what we cannot do for ourselves. God in Christ is already present in, with, and under the elements because he promised he would be.

While the identity crisis of Holy Communion can lead us to more questions than we started with, such as how to distribute the sacraments or who gets them, the place to which we return is simple, even in its complexity: This is the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This meal is for you and me and everyone who seeks God's grace through Christ. I can think of no better way to respond to our Lord's last new commandment; "Do as I have done to you." We do this and remember.

We take Holy Communion regularly because Jesus commanded it (1 Cor. 11:25b). If Jesus lived down the street from us, we would rush to hear his words every single day. In the same way, we return to the table over and over, week after week, not because *we have to*, but because *we get to!* A member of a previous congregation I served argued that celebrating Holy Communion every week reduced its

significance. "It's not as special when it is celebrated every week." he used to say. However, God knows we need the grace that's received in Holy Communion with our neighbors, and that's why we're called to fill that need regularly. What could be more special than that?

It's bread and wine, but it's not just bread and wine. It might seem weird for our modern minds to trust that Jesus is really present in the elements, but this was a big deal for Martin Luther. Luther said the elements are surrounded by God's Word and bound up in it so that Christ is "in, with, and under" the elements. The simplest way to put it? "God is here." It's not by sleight of hand, and it's not play-acting. When we hear "This is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ given for you," that's exactly what we're talking about.

The rules matter, but not as much as Jesus' promises. Churches – even Lutheran churches – struggle over the hows of Holy Communion. Do I hold my hands like this? What are the right words to say in response? How does our church decide who should receive the sacrament? Am I taking this seriously enough? The truth is this stuff matters. It's good to take it seriously. But it's better to remember that the forgiveness we receive through this ritual meal is a gift freely given out of God's bottomless well of grace. So while we might do Holy Communion differently than the church down the street, and are convinced that our way is the only way to do it, let's not make the things that don't matter, matter. And let's not let the things that don't matter separate us.

There was much more to that night. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, a humble act of his leadership. About that humble act, Jesus said, that his disciples should "*Do As I Have Done to You.*" And so whenever Christians get together to celebrate his lordship, we are to put aside our differences, share the peace of the LORD with one another, and then humbly come together in unity, and feast on the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Eternal God, in the sharing of a meal your Son established a new covenant for all people, and in the washing of feet he showed us the dignity of service. Grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit these signs of our life in faith may speak again to our hearts, feed our spirits, and refresh our bodies, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and

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Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen