

April 18, 2019

Holy Thursday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C

Primary Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Secondary Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Sermon Title: “The Real Presence”

Theme

With nightfall 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. At the heart of the Maundy Thursday liturgy is Jesus’ commandment to love one another. As Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, we are called to follow his example as we humbly care for one another, especially the poor and the unloved. At the Lord’s table we remember Jesus’ sacrifice of his life, even as we are called to offer ourselves in love for the life of the world.

Text

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

We often refer to today as Maundy Thursday, the night that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and that is true. This evening is the night we remember "the night he was betrayed."

Maundy Thursday ~ *mandatum* ~ charge, commission, injunction, command, order

But actually, the name Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means *charge, commission, injunction, command, order*. And what is it that we are commanded to do? At the end of the gospel reading Jesus said,

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."

At this pivotal moment of his life, at the celebration of the Passover, the last time he gathered with his disciples before the dreaded events of the evening took place, Jesus used the humble act of foot washing as the example of loving one another and told his disciples that they should love one another that much too.

As encouragement to all of you, during communion distribution, Sr. Pat and I will lead the communion assistants to lay hands on your head for the forgiveness of sins, and will anoint your hands for the ministry of loving, serving, and caring you are called to do.

But this evening *is* also the commemoration of the night that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and so I prefer the name, Holy Thursday. What I planned to do for the sermon was to take a more academic look at what is really going on in this sacred ritual in a sermon I entitled, "The Real Presence."

After Martin Luther upset the Roman Church with his 95 Theses, they put him on trial as a heretic. He was found guilty and they would have killed him as a heretic, except that some of his friends kidnapped him and kept him out of harm's way.

Safely hidden away, the Reformation built momentum, and Luther along with other reformers began the work of articulating other matters of theological concern. One of those concerns was, what is happening at the Lord's Table in Holy Communion.

At the risk of oversimplifying the differences that surfaced during the Reformation, both the Roman Church and the reformers believed in the "real presence," and by that we mean that Christ is truly present in the earthly elements of bread and wine.

The Roman Church uses the term "transubstantiation" to describe how those earthly elements are offered as a sacrifice in the mass by the priest who can affect the change from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ when the words of our Lord are said, "This is my body ... This is my blood." And in some Roman churches today, bells are rung to indicate when that transubstantiation has taken place.

Luther and other reformers rejected this and he came up with the term, "sacramental union" to describe what he understood to happen.

First, we make no sacrifice, except for perhaps our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving made evident by a return of a portion of what God has first given us, our selves, our time, and our possessions. Luther was clear that no ritual enacted by human beings can add one single thing to the salvific work of Christ on the cross.

Furthermore, while the Lutheran Church reserves presiding at the table for the ordained "for good order" I, as one of its ordained ministers, am not bestowed with any divine powers to convert the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

We believe that when come to the table of the Lord's Supper we are indeed in the presence of the crucified and risen Christ through his body and blood, *because he said, "this is my body ... this is my blood."* But just how that is or how it happens is a mystery. We believe it in faith, in the same way that we believe the words Jesus said after that, "given for you for the forgiveness of sins."

Well, I could go on for hours, and perhaps I should at another time and place, but that is not what you want or need on this most holy night.

I would like to share a few thoughts with you.

My parents are not any more religious than you, our active members. I don't suppose they have any more grasp on the mystery of faith than you do. But in the last month of my dad's life I learned some things about my parents that I did not previously know, and it has changed my ministry.

My parents really appreciated receiving Holy Communion. Oh they know and understand that God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ is theirs. They know their sins are forgiven.

But in Holy Communion we get to *experience* that grace in the visible, tangible, sensual occurrence of hearing the words of assurance "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" and then the bread and wine is given to us and we can see it, and feel it, and smell it, and taste it. In a very real way we can visualize that where there were once these elements, a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, after we share them, they diminish until gone – like Jesus on that terrible night.

We further believe that when we take part in this meal, we become one with the mystical body of saints in light – that is to say, with Jesus and the disciples and all the great saints of the church as well as our loved ones who have gone on before us.

I don't know how much of that my parents understood, but I suspect more than I thought they did and this is why I say that. My parent's pastor, a seminary classmate and good friend of mine, was not very responsive to my parent's pastoral needs. My dad was critically, desperately, fatally, ill and their pastor did not give them very much attention.

I cannot say that I have never messed up and lost track of someone who was hospitalized. I have. Zion is a largish church and I am the only ordained. I count on our Eucharistic Ministers to help me, but I think I do a pretty good job with pastoral care. As often as is practical, given all that I am responsible for, I try to get communion to our members before and/or after a major health event.

We are not confused about what we are doing. Sharing Holy Communion is no good luck charm that will make a surgery any more successful. But it is that sensual reminder that we are forgiven, and one with our Lord and one with all other Christians, and that should be a comfort to us in precarious times.

When we, like my dad, are faced with an uncertain future, taking part in Holy Communion can be a very reassuring experience. We hear those words of forgiveness and go forward to whatever is next, trusting our well-being to the Lord, so that come what may, we will be fine. Either we will return to our lives as we left them before the incident, or we will pass on to be with the Lord and that mystical communion of saints. Either way we win! So says the apostle Paul.

As I said, my parent's pastor was not very responsive. He came and gave them communion once because they asked him to. But on another occasion, they asked me to bring my communion kit and with as many of the family as could be there, we had communion. That was the last time we were all together before he died. It was a solemn occasion. We all knew the seriousness of the situation.

But Dad knew he was in a right relationship with the Lord and he entrusted his life in this life and his life in the next life to his mercy. What more could be done?

And while I still get a little emotional about it, this is good news! In the same way Holy Thursday and Good Friday are really good news too.

On Holy Thursday Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. Passover is the celebration that commemorates the freeing of the Israelites from their bondage to the Egyptians. You heard how that first Passover was to take place in the first reading this evening. This is the most festive holiday on the Jewish calendar. It was meant to be celebrated!

At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, it was John the Baptizer who saw Jesus and proclaimed him "the lamb that takes away the sin of the world." So you see, though the night ends terribly for Jesus, and gets much worse tomorrow, Good Friday, it is all good for us. He intended it that way. And he asked his disciples to remember his great love for us.

Jesus himself said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. On this night Jesus told his disciples to re-enact his sacrifice through this ritual as often as they got together to

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

commemorate and celebrate the freeing of all believers from their bondage to sin.
So you see, this really is good news.

Jesus Christ is that lamb that takes away the sin of the world. Let's celebrate that!