

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Maundy Thursday  
April 1, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

This evening, we gather once again in a way that we're accustomed to gathering, in contrast to Maundy Thursday last year. We have, due to pandemic-related concerns, omitted the washing of feet from tonight's service, but, as Maundy Thursday also commemorates the institution of the Lord's Supper, we retain the Breaking of the Bread that goes back to the time of the apostles and, of course, to Christ himself. While it is desirable to include both elements of this day -- serving someone through foot-washing and receiving something in the Eucharist -- we nonetheless include the latter as the very least we can do during these extraordinary times.

"Maundy" is an Old English word that was derived from the Latin word mandatum, which means "command," and is also the root of the English word mandate. If you wanted something that captures the essence of this day in a rather clunky manner, you could call this "Command Thursday." We know from this evening's Scripture texts that Jesus commands us to do two things -- to celebrate his holy Supper and to wash one another's feet. These commands point us to the eternal remembrance and presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as well as to his example of humble service. As for the latter, foot washing was "servant's work," and people's feet got very dirty when they walked for miles and miles on dusty roads. Perhaps we might not appreciate that as much nowadays because everything is so much more tidy and antiseptic!

The Lord's Supper, in contrast to the washing of feet, is not a symbolic observance of Christ's command; rather, it is the presence of Christ himself in the bread and wine that we bless. Indeed, it is a Sacrament under the criteria that it

- (a) is commanded by Christ,
- (b) uses earthly elements, and
- (c) bestows God's grace.

At its very core, the Eucharist communicates that which happened on the cross, through Christ's Body and Blood, to the subsequent generations of the faithful right down to you and me. We may also speak of the grace that is communicated through the Eucharist in terms of forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. As grace is that unmerited gift of God that wipes clean our corrupted nature, we have a means of that grace in the Eucharist. When you receive the Eucharist, you receive Jesus, along with all the gracious gifts he offered to you in his life, death, and resurrection.

Our Second Reading recalls the institution of the Lord's Supper with a paraphrase of Jesus' words, including, "This is my body that is for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24b). The "for you" portion of that sentence reminds us of the grace that the Sacrament offers; this gift is given for you so that you may enjoy the forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation made possible by Christ's sacrifice.

Holy Week is the time in which we immerse ourselves in the story of Christ's sacrifice. We journey with Jesus through his darkest hours...hours that are marked with betrayal, agony, and suffering. These days are so important to us because they take us through the events that are central to Christianity's being, namely Christ's

suffering, death, and resurrection. And please keep in mind that we don't do this to stir up intense feelings of guilt in people; rather, it is for all to see how deeply God loves us. Yes, he loves us so much that he gave his Son to suffer and die for us on a cross. We can, therefore, comprehend grace as it is poured out for us in Christ's self-offering and in the Supper he instituted.

Probably the most intriguing portion of our First Corinthians text is its conclusion; Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This isn't a motif often identified with the Eucharist; we're perhaps more likely to associate it with gift and grace, but not proclamation. But, we do in fact proclaim things through our actions; we, for example, set standards of behavior and give indications of our character in what we do, as a kind of "proclamation without words." Of course, the Eucharist is the Church's meal to be celebrated until the end of time, and so, until that day, it takes the Church back to when it all started -- the Lord's death...where he gave his body and shed his blood as an everlasting testament to what he offered to us. So, as Paul says, whenever we eat and drink in the Eucharist, we are proclaiming precisely this.

We are proclaiming the centerpiece of our salvation.

We are people of memory, too. Think of the many times we reminisce about a departed friend or family member; stories of things that happened decades ago quickly spring to mind...and maybe, just for a moment, that departed friend or family member doesn't seem

so distant from us. Without sounding esoteric (I wouldn't want to give anyone that impression), it's as if they become present with us. And yes, memory plays a similar role in our celebration of the Eucharist. Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24c), and that act of remembrance calls to mind his life, death, and resurrection, bringing the past into the present. And as we remember and bless through prayer at the Holy Table, Christ becomes present in the bread and wine. Remembering is a way for us to bridge things that may be very separated in time and space, and, naturally, it is a key component of any celebration of the Eucharist.

But it is not the only component. When Jesus celebrated the Supper with the disciples, our text mentions that "he had given thanks" (1 Corinthians 11:24a), and thus, the component of thanksgiving deserves our attention. Jesus, of course, would've been familiar with Jewish prayers of thanksgiving, including the berakah, which would've inaugurated Judaism's highest and holiest feasts.

Three of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) place the Last Supper within the context of Passover, so it is very likely that it occurred during Passover. And, of course, thanksgiving -- or berakah -- includes the remembrance of God's faithfulness, remembering here how the angel passed over the homes of the Israelites and spared them from death, because the angel saw the blood on their doorposts. Even today, when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, our prayers of thanksgiving include the recollection of

God's mighty acts from creation to the present day. And so, we, like Jesus, give thanks accordingly when we break bread.

Our First Reading recalls the institution of the first Passover, and the animal to be used at Passover is the lamb, which returns in the New Testament as an image for Jesus. And for Christians, Jesus is the Lamb who was sacrificed -- not necessarily for Passover, but for the sin that had driven a wedge between God and humanity. The sacrifice of Jesus is the once-for-all (as opposed to repeated) sacrifice for the removal of sin among all who believe. You may remember how the Jewish faith of Jesus' time operated; sacrifices, for sin especially, were offered by priests on behalf of the faithful as a way of atoning for their sins. But with Jesus, that happens only once -- on the cross -- and so we look to the Church for the means of grace when we wish to be cleansed of our sin. And, of course, one of those means of grace is the Eucharist.

The Lamb of God -- Jesus Christ -- sacrificed for us is the One whose Body and Blood we eat and drink so that we may receive forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation. We have this direct access to these gifts by virtue of Christ himself, whose own sacrifice put an end to the sacrifices of old, and whose death and resurrection saved us from sin, death, and the devil. This is God's grace given to us as pure gift, and communicated to us through the promise of his Word and in the bread and wine of the Sacrament.

Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, ready to confer all the benefits of his death on the cross, to those of us here who hunger

and thirst for his precious gifts.

"Do this," Christ commands, and from his command we receive the fruits of his extraordinary sacrifice for us. When we do as he commands, the blessings surely follow.

Amen.