

Sermon

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St. Brendan's Church, Stonington ME

Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

About 3 weeks from now (Monday, April 22, 2024), many of our Jewish friends will gather for a Seder to celebrate the beginning of Passover. The meal and this most important festival remembers and celebrates God's saving act for the people of Israel. Re-enacting that meal that took place thousands of years ago, connects them to liberating love of God that still flows today, re-members them with God and each other as a people blessed then and in the here and now, and sends them forth into the days ahead hopefully renewed, reconstituted in faith, strength and hope. It looks back, remembers, re-connects, all to be sent out again as God's people. The Jewish calendar and our Holy Week calendar often coincide, though not this year. Still, as we do every Maundy Thursday, we hear the "institution" of that celebration in our first reading from Exodus. And, of course, this important remembrance is critical to our Christian tradition as well.

This past Sunday - Palm Sunday - we heard in the Gospel of Mark the disciple's asking Jesus, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" (Mk 14:12)

John sets the time and the place in our gospel reading this evening: "Now 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." (John 13:1) Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem, along with countless others, to celebrate the Passover.

Here is a nuance between the Synoptic gospels - Mark, Luke and Matthew - and the gospel of John. In the three Synoptic gospels, Jesus instructs his disciples to find the room and prepare the Passover Seder. They gather to remember the liberating love of God for God's people. This meal becomes his last supper with them. During the meal, he offers the disciples an additional way to remember and reconstitute themselves in the love of God for God's people: he took bread, blessed it, broke it, shared it, saying "This is my body, shared for you." He took the wine, and said "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood...do this, in remembrance of me." He institutes the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist - as a remembrance of him. It is a sign, a sacrament that opens us to the love of God, the way of Love, that Jesus embodies.

Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this last supper in John is not a Passover Seder. Passover, according to John's dates, is the next night. For John, the sacrificial lamb offered as a sign the liberating love of God is Christ's own body. He

is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Hence, we say at each Eucharist, "Christ our Passover is Sacrificed for us."

From the earliest days, as we heard from Paul's letter to the Corinthians tonight, the followers of Jesus gathered to worship and be remembered, restored and sent forth by celebrating the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist.

We don't know for sure, but it is safe to assume that the Eucharist was practiced by the Johannine community, even though it is not spelled out in the gospel. In John, however, he offers another sacramental sign as an inbreaking of God's liberating love: he washed the disciples' feet.

After a long journey, it would be the custom of the host to prepare or have the household servant prepare a bath for the person to wash completely. For a shorter journey, it would be the custom to prepare to have just the guests' feet washed. But more than for hygienic reasons, in John the foot-washing is a teaching moment that underscores two aspects of God's love for God's people in Jesus. First, it highlights Jesus' self-giving love to the disciples and hence the church. Peter, we see resists, as if to say, this is not how we should respond to the Messiah, but rather with praise and thanksgiving and exultation perhaps. But Jesus says, no. I come to you, I call your name, I am here to strengthen, to heal, to wash: let me do so. Peter doesn't understand now, but he will later. We are invited to let Jesus into our hearts, to know the love of him and God.

Second, to be transformed in the liberating love of God that Jesus embodies and teaches, the disciples and the church is to emulate what he has done. "For I have set as an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

For us, foot washing is not a custom of our culture, unless you are one that heads to the spa for an occasional pedicure. No, as guests arrive at our house, we might point someone to the bathroom wash up. But we will re-enact the foot washing here tonight, as the church has done for hundreds of years. And I know many still find this uncomfortable. Not only does it take a moment to untie or slip out of our shoe, and remove a sock, but it exposes us somewhat. I think our Lord knows this, and sees it all the more appropriate. Even if you do not come forward, the symbolism is there in front of us. But all the imperfections are before God, and he is there to hold and wash them into refreshment of life.

Following the foot washing, John tells us that "Jesus" was deeply troubled in spirit, for his betrayer was at hand. John has already told us that Jesus "knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father" (John 13:1), and also that "he knew who was to betray him." (John 13:11) We don't know the mind of Jesus, but it could be his mind was troubled that his close friend, the one whom he had chosen and trusted, was caught up in the events and people around him that he could feel him slipping from this friendship into one of betrayal. Yet, he still presses on, in self-giving love. Yet, he has washed his feet.

He offers them a new commandment: “that you love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) It is worth remembering, that the word “Maundy” is derived from the Latin word “mandatum,” which means “commandment.” At this last supper, twice he tells them, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” He prepares them to enter the world after the intimacy of this meal. He teaches that it is in humble, self-giving service that God’s love is known. We are to “do” as Jesus does. It takes time, sometimes, and it can challenge us.

Liturgically we are about to enter the dark and violent side of the Passion. Physically, we are about to go back outside into the world where both beauty and injustice are found. Here is the tension: I feel safe here, but I must leave. We go out, and know how is easy to caught up in events and thoughts and actions that seem out of our control, to betray even our best intentions. Our Lord knows this, and asks that we come back to the table, come back into community. To celebrate the Lord’s Supper, to remember, to re-member, and be given strength and hope for the future. We are invited again and again to serve others, and share in his words, actions and body, that we may have fullness of life.

Remembering therefore the path to freedom through the Passover, restoring and renewing ourselves in hospitality service, and reconciling and re-memembering ourselves in Communion, I offer this prayer to send us into these three great days and beyond:

“Lord Jesus as I remember your washing of the disciples’ feet, keep me humble and ready to serve. As I remember the Last Supper, make me aware of your coming in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. As I remember your betrayal, keep my heart and life loyal to you, Christ my Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen” (Prayers for Anglicans, by David Adam, Kevin Mayhew, 2008, p.96 – Maundy Thursday)

Amen.