

Thursday, April 1, 2021

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12.1-14; 1 Corinthians 11.23-26; John 13.1-17, 31b-35

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/271064191242331>

(Sermon begins at about 14:50)

“The Family Table”

What is the most sacred place you know?

Many will undoubtedly say, “the church, of course.” St. Thomas. St. Gregory’s. Wherever you call your spiritual home. Or maybe a magnificent cathedral you have visited. St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Canterbury Cathedral. Notre Dame. Some may feel the most sacred place is a special place in the woods. A quiet spot on the beach. A favorite mountaintop vista. There really are no right or wrong answers, no specific criteria.

If an extraterrestrial landed in our midst, right here and now, and tried to figure out what the most sacred place was based solely on our scripture readings, they might get the idea that the most sacred place is the family dinner table. While only our Gospel reading specifically mentions a table, all three readings imply a table—involving activities that typically occur at a dining table. In our Old Testament reading from Exodus, God gives instructions to Moses and the Hebrews about preparation for the first Passover meal. Complete with instructions on how it is to be eaten. Now, we don’t know exactly where the Hebrews ate their Passover meal before leaving Egypt on their forty-year journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Although, since the passage talks about preparing the designated meal for each family, what typically comes to mind is the image of families gathered at their own dinner tables. Not unlike Passover celebrations in nearly every Jewish home, to this day.

And, of course, our Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians and our Gospel reading from John are both accounts of another meal, shared around another table. Another Passover meal. This time, not in Egypt, but in Jerusalem. Two stories with different details, different emphases, but the same meal, the same table. The same “family.” Even if not a family of blood. Strike that. Not a family by birth. Yet certainly a family by blood. Christ’s blood.

Before I go any further, I want to stay for a moment on this image of the family table as the most sacred place. Because I think it is, if not the most sacred place, certainly one of the most sacred places, we can find. Or it at least has the potential to be. Most of us are from a generation, grew up in a time, when the family still sat down at the kitchen or dining room table every night and shared dinner together. At least most of the time. For most families, it was not just sitting down to eat food. The evening meal was a sacramental event. It was a time of gathering, putting the events of the day aside, and being together as a family. It was an activity that embodied more fully what this gathering of people is truly about, both individually and collectively. It was a time to talk about what was important in our lives. What did you learn in school today? How was work today? Did you do anything interesting today? What are your

plans for tomorrow? It was a time to get to know our family members a little better, to get to know them more deeply. It was one of the key times and places where bonding as a family occurred. Yes, there may have also been disagreements, arguments, even explosions. But that is also part of what it means to be a family. To find ways to navigate familial life even in the midst of stress and conflict. And ultimately, to help us learn more about our family members and to grow closer even in the midst of—particularly in the midst of—those difficult moments. Admittedly, this might be a slightly idealistic image. Not always what really happened at the family dinner table. But looking back, didn't at least some of those things happen? At least occasionally?

And even if it didn't in your family—and if it didn't, I am sorry that you missed out on that—it is part of what we often think of as life in the “ideal American family.” They way life was depicted on TV shows in the 50s and 60s. And how virtually every episode of the contemporary police drama “Blue Bloods” ends. Some time ago, I saw an interview with a “Blue Bloods” cast member, who noted that it was the Sunday dinner scene at the end of every episode where the real family drama played out, not on the streets of New York, where most of the family members are police officers. Those dinner scenes are meant to convey the importance of family and even more, the importance of communications within the family—even in, particularly in, difficult times. So, yeah, the family dinner table is pretty important in forming the members of the family and shaping how the family operates as a unit.

So, back to the family dinner table in our Epistle and Gospel readings. The family dinner table at which the events we know as the Last Supper, as Maundy Thursday, took place. As I said, the readings from 1 Corinthians and John's Gospel provide different views of the same event.

First the account in 1 Corinthians, since this is what we most commonly think of as the Last Supper. Primarily because these words of the Apostle Paul, recounting the Last Supper, form the basis for our Eucharistic Prayers. Where Jesus takes the common elements of the Passover meal, bread and wine, blesses them, and gives them to his disciples. His family. Just what the host of the meal would do. Just what a parental figure would do. But this was different. In breaking the bread, in pouring out the wine, Jesus gave them new meaning. “This [bread] is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11.24-25).

It was no accident that Jesus used elements of the common meal to illustrate what was going to happen to him, what he was going to do for us. Jesus was all about taking common, everyday things and using them to illustrate essential truths about God and God's Kingdom. In the simple act of breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, he was demonstrating what was to happen. That his body would be broken. His blood would be poured out. But it would not be in vain. That his body would be broken and his blood poured out for the sake of his family—for those who follow him. As we clarify in our Eucharistic Prayer, “This is my Body, which is given for you . . . This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you” (BCP, 362-363). What is going to happen the next day—on Good Friday—is for them. For us. In reframing the meaning of the elements, of the bread and wine, as being his body and his blood, Jesus is not just saying his death is for them, for us. In reframing the meaning of the elements, he is providing a way for us to continually be with him, to remember what he did for us. “Do this in remembrance of

me.” But it’s not just about remembering. It’s also about Jesus becoming a part of them, becoming a part of us. Just as consuming bread and wine provides physical nourishment and sustenance, consuming the bread and wine that is reframed as his body and blood means that Jesus becomes a very real and tangible part of who we are. That he nourishes and sustains us spiritually through his ongoing presence in the Eucharistic meal.

There is more to what happened at the family dinner table where the Last Supper took place. The Gospel according to John has a completely different focus. In John’s telling, we know that Jesus and the disciples were sharing a Passover meal. But there is no mention of the meal itself. Instead, John focuses on another event that happened before the meal. Before sitting down to eat, it was customary for servants to wash the feet of the guests. Instead of servants doing this task, Jesus did it himself. Unprecedented for the host. The disciples, particularly Peter, are puzzled as to what Jesus was doing. Jesus essentially tells them to be patient, they will understand in due course. When he was finished with the washing of their feet, he said “Do you know what I have done to you? . . . I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” He then tells them, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34).

There it is. A lesson. An important component that is often a part of the gathering around the family dinner table. But this is not just any lesson. This is THE lesson. The lesson that gives its name to this day. Maundy Thursday. Maundy being derived from the Latin *mandatum*, the first word of the phrase, “A new commandment I give to you.” The lesson that is foundational to our life as the family that is the Body of Christ. That we love one another as Christ loves us. Because if we cannot bring ourselves to do that, we might as well push back from the table and go our separate ways.

Tonight, we gather around the most sacred place there is. The table. Not just any table. God’s table. The table that represents the one Jesus sat at with his disciples, with his family, sharing their last meal together. The table that through Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper made it our family table. This altar tonight serving as the common table for the family that is comprised of the parishioners of St. Thomas of Canterbury, the parishioners of St. Gregory’s, and our combined extended family from across the miles and across time zones. All gathered, albeit virtually, to share in the feast hosted by the head of our family, Jesus Christ. We gather and partake of the elements of bread and wine, reframed as his body and blood. In so doing, whether physically, or as necessitated by pandemic, in a spiritual manner, Christ becomes a part of who we are. Nourishing and sustaining us. In so doing, we remember the lessons he taught. The most important being that if we are to truly be his followers, we must love one another as he loves us.

What is the most sacred place? Our family dinner table. Where we share a meal. Where we share our lives with our loved ones. That is what Jesus made happen at the Last Supper. Only, it was a place not just of sharing life, but a place of sharing new life. The new life we are invited to partake in through bread and wine, body and blood. The new life that we are invited to share through our love for one another. The new life that is the gift Christ gives to us, his family.