

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Maundy Thursday

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

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

St. Thomas of Canterbury, Long Beach and St. Gregory's, Long Beach

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/100072033161127/videos/6245609552128334>

(Sermon begins at about 15:30)

“Family Meals”

For many, the family meal is sacrosanct. Of course, there are some family meals that are more special, more sacred, than others. Some of the obvious ones in our culture are the big holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, maybe Easter. In some families, some of these meals take on an almost iconic aura, involving specific decorations, the use of special dishes, and most importantly the inclusion of particular foods. Some of these are so sacred that one dare not even think about changing certain aspects of the meal. Thanksgiving dinner is perhaps among the most inviolable, with an estimated 88 percent of families having turkey (according to the National Turkey Federation). And certainly each family has other dishes that need to be included. In mine, it is acceptable to tinker with how the potatoes are done or what type of dressings are fixed. But we insist on my mother's cranberry salad and her sweet potato casserole. And for us, Christmas is always, always, always, Mom's lasagna. We almost kicked my brother-in-law out of the family last year when he suggested that maybe we not have lasagna for Christmas because of Mom having chemotherapy just a few days before Christmas. Mom was not deterred, and we still had lasagna last year. There are some things you just don't mess with. So yes, special family meals and associated traditions are pretty high on the list of sacred events.

All of our Scripture readings for Maundy Thursday center on family meals. The Old Testament reading from Exodus being instructions about the first Passover meal the Hebrews had in Egypt, right before heading out on their forty-year wilderness journey. The New Testament reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians recounts Jesus establishing the sacrament of Holy Communion at the last Passover meal with his disciples. And the reading from the Gospel according to John references that last Passover meal. In all cases, these are family meals, as it were—using a broad definition of family. And in all cases, involving prescribed foods.

Of course, the reason we have the reading from Exodus on Maundy Thursday is because the Passover is the premier celebration in the Jewish tradition that is the foundation of our own Christian tradition. The first Passover meal was really a family meal. As the Hebrews were really of one family descended from Jacob and his twelve sons who settled in Egypt. Although, originally the meal was certainly not a celebratory meal, but a meal of preparation.

It was the Passover meal, the elements of which have remained unchanged since that first meal some 1,300 years before the time of Jesus, that was the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples. With his family—not a family of blood, but a family of choice, of intention. The meal being the event we commemorate this night. Of course, while we do include the traditional

unleavened bread in our commemoration, we do not incorporate other traditional Passover foods such as roasted lamb and bitter herbs. After all, our commemoration is not about the Jewish Passover per se. Rather, what is important for us is what Jesus did at his last Passover meal, when he took particular elements of that meal and gave them new meaning, new significance. While not contained in John's Gospel, we do have a record of it in the other Gospels and in Paul's retelling in First Corinthians. Elements we all know so well: the bread and the wine. Bread broken to be passed around to the Twelve. Wine poured out for them to drink. Common elements of the Passover meal that Jesus reframed to represent his body and his blood. The body that would be broken and the blood that would be shed the next day on what we know as Good Friday. Symbols, elements, that would forever be changed in our collective consciousness as those who are part of the family of Christ.

Of course, food is not the only part of family meals. There are also customs, traditions, and practices associated with the meal. Here again, we see a reframing of one such practice in the Johannine account of the Last Supper. A central part of the meal as reported in John's Gospel was foot washing. That "during supper Jesus . . . got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then 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."

Now, strictly speaking, this is not something specifically associated with the Passover meal. And normally, the washing of feet was not a central part of any meal. It was really an ancillary activity in preparation for a meal. Not unlike washing your hands before eating. In ancient times, foot washing was an act of hospitality offered to one's guests after traveling. This would have normally been performed by a servant or by the guests themselves prior to the meal. But here, in the context of the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus, while the host of the meal, takes on the role of servant, as well. In taking on the role of servant, Jesus extends the meaning of the washing of feet beyond a purely utilitarian function to something more significant. As stated in the interchange between Jesus and Peter, the washing is not really about cleanliness. As Jesus says to Peter, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." No, the act of foot washing was really a sign of relationship. As both host and servant, Jesus welcomes his disciples into his home, figuratively speaking. In the broader context of the Last Supper and all that signifies, of all that is to come, this washing of feet could be taken as a symbol of welcoming the disciples into his eternal home, into eternal life with him. In this, the act of foot washing is an outward and visible sign—a sacramental sign—of Jesus' profound love for his own. As John tells us in the opening, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Which really is better translated as "he loved them to the utmost." Or "he loved them fully." What he was doing in the washing of the disciples' feet was a sign of that ultimate, undying love, of that deeply significant relationship with them.

Jesus takes this sacramental sign one step further in the discourse that follows. "After 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? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.'" The foot washing wasn't just a sign of his relationship with them. His intent was for this simple,

utilitarian act, to be a symbolic representation of their relationships with one another, as well. Jesus concludes with: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." What happens here, the act of washing his disciples' feet, is symbolic of something far greater. Jesus frames this not as a suggestion of what would be nice for them to do. Rather, he frames this as a commandment. Something they are required to do. It is a sacramental sign of a new way of being. Of them following the servant ministry that he himself modeled in his own life and ministry. Of course, the commandment to love one another is not new. It is an explicit part of Jewish law. But in reiterating it as he does, in combining it with a sacramental sign, Jesus is reframing that love in the context of his impending death, which will be the ultimate sign of love for his own. And as his own, we are to seek to demonstrate that same love for one another.

What is commemorated, what is represented, in our scripture readings this night, is the outline for our family meal as God's beloveds, as the Body of Christ. What we refer to as Holy Eucharist, as Holy Communion. A meal we participate in every week. Of course, we don't do foot washing every week. Only on this night do we participate in that most sacred act. Only on this night do we dare to make ourselves vulnerable to allow our feet to be washed. Only on this night do we dare to humble ourselves to wash the feet of our sisters and brothers. A reminder of why we do what we do in this place, and particularly at this altar. A reminder that we are gathered for a family meal. And more importantly, that the meal we share, even when not including the washing of feet, is nonetheless a sacramental sign of the new commandment Jesus gave his disciples—which we all are—of the love Christ has for us and of the love that we are to have for one another.

Tonight, we gather, two congregations—St. Thomas of Canterbury and St. Gregory's. We come together as one family, bound by our common history. Bound by the actions of the Hebrews preparing for a family meal, the first Passover meal, before the beginning of the Exodus. Bound by the actions of our Lord instituting the sacrament of Holy Communion at his last Passover meal with his chosen family. Bound together by a new example and a new commandment to love one another as Christ loves all members of his beloved family. Let us now prepare ourselves to share in our own family meal.