

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Thursday, April 13, 2017
“The Passion of Christ, Part 1: Dinner Conversation”

Texts: John 13:1-17, 31-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you were listening to my sermon this past Sunday, you will recall that I stressed the importance of experiencing the entire Passion story. I trust that many of you have come here this evening are here to hear Part 1 of the story. Today we begin the Triduum, or three Holy Days that lead us from the gates of Jerusalem, through its narrow streets, to the palaces of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to Golgotha, the cross, and the tomb. So, now let's begin.

Let's start by going back two Sundays to the Gospel lesson for the 5th Sunday in Lent. This was the story of the Raising of Lazarus. Jesus had performed some incredible miracles, like feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. He cured many sick people. He calmed a stormy sea. He walked on water. He brought back a little girl and a young man back to life. But, what he did to Lazarus was his masterpiece, his *pièce de résistance*: he raised Lazarus after having been dead for four days, his body decaying, and past the point of no return. That really angered religious leaders, so much so that they began to conspire against him. But perhaps not just because Jesus threatened their power, but because they were faced with something and someone they did not understand. Often when communities don't know how to deal with people or situations they don't understand, they try to get rid of them, rather than work to understand them. Maybe the Jewish leaders feared the unknown, and were particularly worried that so many people were following that Jesus guy. But Jesus managed to escape them.

Now what's curious is that a few days later (six days before the Passover festival, actually), Jesus returned to Bethany. You'd think that with all that trouble he was stirring, he'd stay away. That's what you and I might have done, but not Jesus. The next scene in the story, Jesus goes back to visit Mary, Martha, and Lazarus and has dinner with them. It is at this encounter that Mary anoints Jesus's feet with oil mixed with costly nard—a common perfume in the ancient world, used for a number of reasons including at the burial of the dead. We heard this story at mass on Tuesday. And guess who else was there? Judas Iscariot! Judas was there raising a fuss at what Mary had done, claiming that she

shouldn't be using such expensive stuff to do the expected hospitality that one would show to a guest: comforting their weary feet after a long journey on dusty roads. Now by that time, Jesus had earned quite a reputation for raising Lazarus, so people were coming out of the woodwork to see him and they started believing in Jesus in record numbers. Jesus had become quite the celebrity, and that ticked off the religious leaders even more, to the point that they wanted to put both Lazarus and Jesus to death.

Now things were really buzzing. When word got out that Jesus was coming to town—that “town” being Jerusalem—people who had come from places far and wide to Jerusalem for the upcoming Festival of the Passover flocked to see Jesus. Jerusalem is surrounded by a wall that encloses the city, and as Jesus entered the city, people took palm branches and waved them as he passed by, and praised him as the one who came in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel. OK. I guess you can see where this story is headed. It was bad enough that this scary guy was performing outrageous miracles and gathering an increasing number of followers, but now they're calling him the King of Israel. Uh-uh. This nothing of an upstart from Nazareth, son of a carpenter, is now being called the King of Israel. “Look, the world has gone after him!” some of the Pharisees cried.

Over the next few days Jesus's following continued to grow. Even some authorities believed in him, but they wouldn't admit it for fear that they'd be put out of the synagogue by the Pharisees. Now we fast forward a few days to the day before the Passover Festival when Jesus is having a meal with his disciples. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke give more details about how they got there, but John immediately draws us into the room where we find Jesus who gets up from the table where they were eating, takes off his robe, ties a towel around himself, and begins washing the feet of his disciples. Think about the magnitude of such a gesture. In the ancient world, it was customary when someone came for dinner, for the guests to have their feet washed, but that was the role either of the women of the house or of the servants and slaves, not the host, not the leader, not the teacher, certainly not the Messiah. But Jesus showed an act of unbelievable humility, taking on the role of a servant, even though he was the leader. Foot washing may seem very strange to us nowadays. I cringe at the idea, myself, because I hate for other people to touch my

feet, and I'm very ticklish. But back then, foot washing was a sign of extreme hospitality.

Tonight's liturgy will recreate that moment when Jesus washed his disciples' feet as I wash the feet of twelve members of this congregation. It is the ultimate example of role reversal. In the Gospel story, Jesus was the host, and yet he was the servant. This image has become linked to the servanthood that is inherent in the priesthood. Before we are ordained priests, we are ordained deacons, *diakonos*, which is Greek for servant or attendant. It literally means one who kicks up dust in their haste. We are ordained first as servants and then as priests, but as with any sacrament, once conferred by the power of the Holy Spirit, it cannot be undone. So all priests, even bishops, are still deacons, by virtue of ordination, and therefore, always servants. We remember that tonight in the washing of the feet. It isn't a bath; when Peter wanted Jesus to wash his hands and his head, too, Jesus made it clear that he was not bathing Peter, but that he was washing his feet, like a servant would do to a guest.

The other part of the story that we heard tonight is that we get details on how Jesus identifies Judas as his betrayer by giving him a piece of bread dipped in a dish and telling him to do what he must. Then after Judas leaves, Jesus tells the rest of the group how God will be glorified through him—he was speaking about the Cross, of course—and then he gives the *mandatum*, the command “to love one another, just as I have loved you.” Everyone will know who his disciples are by the way they love each other. Interestingly, what we *don't* hear in this passage are the Words of Institution of the Eucharist (i.e., “This is my body which is given for you, etc..”) Those words come from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and we heard it in our Epistle lesson tonight, but if you compare the events, it is clear that Jesus would have said them during this meal. However, John focuses on the betrayal, which will lead to the cross, and Jesus's ultimate work of salvation and redemption as the Messiah, the Christ.

It was at this meal that Jesus linked the elements of bread and wine to his upcoming passion and death—his body and blood as victim for the ultimate sacrifice, yet a meal where he also served as the host. In the Epistle lesson, it says that Jesus took bread, he gave thanks, and he broke it with his friends. This tradition of giving thanks was part of the

Jewish *berekah*, in which one would have given thanks to God before eating. For example, before eating bread, one would pray: ‘*Baruch attah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz*,’ Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. They are similar to the prayers at the minor elevations as our Eucharistic table is set. So in giving thanks, Jesus was simply following Jewish tradition. That tradition continued as part of very early Christianity, because Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was written some two to three decades before the Gospels. And, we continue that tradition to this very day in our Eucharistic Prayer. But, the Eucharist has another significant meaning as well. It is the sacrifice. Christ will offer himself as a sacrifice to God in the same way that lambs were offered as a sacrifice to God in the Temple. Every year at the Festival of the Passover (Pesach), lambs were sacrificed as a commemoration of the angel that passed over the Hebrew people in Egypt, because they followed God’s commandment and slew a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorposts. (That was the first lesson this evening.) The lamb is known as the lamb of the Pesach (or Pascal lamb). Jesus in his sacrifice on the Cross became the ultimate Paschal lamb.

Our celebration of Maundy Thursday shows us that Jesus’s story is our story, and our story is Jesus’s story. The events that we witness tonight help draw us into the journey that leads from the gates of Jerusalem to Golgotha. All of this helps us to remind us that we have been given a charge to love one another and to take care of one another. It’s not enough for us to give lip service to that mandate, we have to put our money where our mouth is, as it were. I don’t see that happening too much these days. As I was writing this sermon, I kept being interrupted by news flashes on my iPhone about whether or not the President authorized use of the largest non-nuclear bomb that was dropped earlier today against ISIS forces situated in Afghanistan. We’re faced with changes in government policy and the attitudes of people that threaten the civil rights of many people, both Americans and non-Americans. We live in broken families, we experience strained and broken relationships, we see and experience inequality, injustice, persecution for one’s faith, and general disregard for other people. Not enough people are living into Jesus’s mandate to love one another, and not enough of us who hear the message are doing anything about it. Most of us are guilty anyway.

So as we enter this most holy of days, let us walk the hard journey with Jesus to the cross. Let us go out of our way to be the loving, caring people that we have been mandated to be. Jesus sure went out of his way for us by enduring heinous torture and a horrible death. But, that part of the story is to be continued, so tune in tomorrow.

Resources

Texts of Blessings before eating, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/90551/jewish/Texts-of-Blessings-Before-Eating.htm

Passover Sacrifice, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11934-passover-sacrifice>

Mitchell, Leonel L., *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007)