

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Thursday, April 6, 2023
“Why is this night different from all other nights?”

Texts: John 13:1-17, 31-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Exodus 12:1-14

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.

Jews around the world began celebrating Passover last night. As required by the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, they must mark at this time each year, events relating to the first Passover in which the Hebrew people, enslaved in Egypt, were passed over by an angel of death; that was followed by the exodus out of Egypt, and the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. During Passover, a traditional meal called a seder is eaten every night, and consists of various rituals, prayers, and specific foods. In the course of the meal, a child traditionally stands up and asks the question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The rituals and foods during the meal are chosen specifically to answer that question. Tonight, and during the remainder of the Triduum, we should ask that same question: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Each day and night for the next three days will be different from all other days and nights.

First of all, it isn't Lent anymore. This is Holy Week. From Sunday until tonight, the liturgical color was red. Today begins an even more special segment of Holy Week called the Triduum—the three Holy Days. The Triduum began at sundown tonight and continues through sundown on Sunday. Why sundown? Because the Jewish calendar marks its days from sundown to sunrise the following day. (Remember in Genesis how the days of creation were marked: “And there was evening, and there was morning, the first day.”) The Roman calendar used midnight as its marker between days, and the Western world still uses that system to this day. So according to Jewish calendar convention, it is now Friday.

Tonight's liturgy focuses on two very important themes: servanthood and the Institution of the Eucharist. These two are linked, because the first is borne out of love, and out of that kind of love, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, and for that we give thanks. Let's first look at the theme of servanthood. This is to commemorate the events in the gospel lesson from this evening. Jesus was in an upper room, meaning a room above the main level of the house, having dinner with his disciples sometime before the festival of the Passover. It probably was not a Passover meal in the traditional sense for the time, since the festival had not yet begun, and whether it would have looked anything like a modern-day Seder is questionable. But anyway, while they were

eating, Jesus got up and washed their feet. 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 and was expected of the host. Just imagine living in an arid, almost desert, climate where the roads are dusty, traveling all day on foot in sandals. They didn't have asphalt streets and concrete sidewalks like we have today. So by the time you arrived at your destination, you were pretty dirty and dusty. Washing feet was a sign of hospitality. Usually it was the woman of the house who did it, like when Mary washed Jesus's feet with her hair and rubbed them with nard, just a few chapters earlier, but in a wealthier household, it would be a servant. But in the gospel story, it was the master, Jesus, the teacher himself who took off his outer robe, put a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples. It was the ultimate example of role reversal. 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 are still deacons, by virtue of ordination, and 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.

But servanthood is not limited to priests. Jesus told the disciples to follow the example of their Lord and Teacher, to do to each other as he had done to them and wash each others' feet. At the end of the gospel story, Jesus gives them a new commandment, a *novum mandatum*, (that's where we get the word 'maundy' in Maundy Thursday): "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another." We are all called to love one another as Jesus loved his disciples and to be servants to each other. In many churches on Maundy Thursday, the tradition foot washing involves the entire community, where the priest washes the first person's feet, then that person gets up and washes the feet of the next person in line. After all have had their feet washed, the last person washes the feet of the priest. Service is an act of love toward another. Jesus showed his love toward his disciples by washing their feet, but Jesus also showed an act of even greater love for humanity in his willingness to die on the cross.

The other theme this evening is that of the Institution of the Eucharist. Ironically, this narrative does not show up in John's account of the last supper, but it is told in the other synoptic gospels and in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which we read as the second lesson. These are the words that we hear at every mass over the bread and the wine: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same manner, he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." They are part of the formula in the Eucharistic Prayer by which

the ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of 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—but he also served as the host. He 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, and we continue that tradition at the Eucharistic table. 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 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.

You will notice that the colors on the altar and the hangings and coverings have become white tonight. We do this to represent the festal celebration of the institution of the Eucharist. Toward the end of the mass, we will process the Blessed Sacrament to the Altar of Repose, kind of a mini Corpus Christi celebration. This practice dates to the late middle ages and was embraced strongly in the 19th Century. However, more recent practice has been to keep the color red, in keeping with the liturgical color of Holy Week and the sacrificial nature of this day and to provide a more consistent link to the rest of the Triduum, which follows, because tonight’s celebration is not the end. There is no blessing or dismissal at the end of tonight’s liturgy; instead, it will end abruptly once the chancel has been stripped and the top of the altar washed with wine and water. If this were a television series, the words “To be continued” would flash on the screen. At that time we will have an opportunity to sit in the chapel for a while and be in the presence of Christ as we reflect on his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Tonight, the story isn’t finished. You must come back tomorrow for Part 2. Why is this night different from all other nights? Because we wash, we serve, we commemorate, we give thanks, we watch, and we wait. Amen.

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)

Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the entrance into Jerusalem to the resurrection*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011)