

Sermon for Maundy Thursday B
Thursday, March 24, 2016
“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.

Why is this night different from all other nights? Last Sunday evening, we gathered to share a meal together modeled after a Jewish Seder. The seder is a traditional meal eaten during the modern-day Jewish Passover, which retells events relating to the first Passover in which the Hebrew people, enslaved in Egypt, were passed over by an angel of death, and events relating to the exodus out of Egypt, which followed, and the liberation of the Hebrews. 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 remembrances during the meal are designed 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, we are not in Lent anymore. We are in Holy Week. If you were here over the last three days, you would have noticed that we changed all of the liturgical coverings and hangings to red. But, beyond that, we are in The Triduum—the three holy days leading up to and including Easter. 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. In a short while, you will witness me washing the feet of twelve members of this congregation. This is to commemorate the events in the gospel lesson 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. Did you ever see Charlie Brown? There's a character named Pig Pen. Whenever his character comes around, there is a plume of dust around him. I imagine it was something like that back then. So 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.

This past Tuesday, I attended the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral. This is something that our Church does every year during Holy Week. Traditionally, the mass is held today, on Maundy Thursday, but most priests are busy that day, so we many dioceses hold it earlier in the week. At that mass, the bishop blesses and consecrates oils for use in churches

during the year; each parish gets its stock of oil for the sick, for catechumens, and Sacred Chrism, which we use at baptism. But the other component of that mass is the renewal of vows for those of us who are ordained. It is a reminder of what it is we do. I'd like to share with you some of the things that our bishop said at that mass:

“I would like to suggest to you, my sisters and brothers, in the remainder of this Holy Week, that we attempt to get singular in our focus, to push aside the things in our lives that keep us stepping in and out of darkness...We must be healers, cleansers, hearers, blessers, teachers and proclaimers. We must call out death in all its forms, care for the poor, administer the sacraments, and live in the midst of God's people with integrity and humility...Nothing else really matters. All our petty conflicts, struggles for power and influence, money, status, position, and possessions, matter little. The people of God, the people we serve, they are waiting for us. Must they look for another, or another time, another rector, or vicar, or deacon, or bishop? The people of God, whom we are called to serve, deserve our best efforts, our deepest concern, and our profound patience and earnest prayer. And when they are hateful, and hurtful, and distrust us, and wish us ill, we must not return in kind. But in all sincere humility, like our Savior Christ, we must be willing to endure, and teach and admonish in loving-kindness as a remedy to the ways of the world and to remain faithful to the calling we have received. The Church cannot behave like the world, and the ordained in the church cannot resort to the remedies of the world. Each of us know the pain and hurt of the world around us. Each of us have experienced betrayal and hurtful speech. The people entrusted to our care come needing us to be other than what the world has delivered in their lives.”

But servanthood is not limited to priests. Christians, like the church, cannot behave like the world, and we cannot resort to the remedies of the world. We Christians must offer to the world something different from what the rest of the world is giving. 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. We recognize that on Maundy Thursday with the tradition of foot

washing. We are all called to serve. 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.

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. In fact, you will notice that tonight's liturgy will conclude not with a dismissal, but abruptly once the chancel has been stripped and the top of the altar washed with wine and water. In fact, the entire Triduum is one long liturgical unit. If we 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. If you want to see how it turns out, you have to come back. The dismissal doesn't happen until Saturday night at the end of the Vigil.

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)

Excerpts from the sermon preached by The Rt. Rev. Lawrence Provenzano at the Chrism Mass, March 22, 2016.