

Maundy Thursday

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

This evening, as you receive Holy Communion, your Lenten journey ends, and together, we enter what is known as the “Triduum” or “the Three Days” which begins tonight and ends on Saturday evening at the Easter Vigil.

This evening, called “Maundy Thursday” the night in which Jesus was betrayed, when Jesus instituted Holy Communion is new for many in the congregation. “Maundy” (not “Monday” which I thought it was a kid) comes from the Latin word *mandatum* from which we get our word “mandate” which we translate to “commandment.”

This is the “new commandment” we get from Jesus. The New Commandment, or what we call the Greatest Commandment, is to love one another as Jesus loves us.

Jesus shows us what this love looks like by washing his disciples’ feet. It’s a gesture of humility. They should be washing HIS feet, not the other way around. That’s why they were so uncomfortable with what he was doing.

The foot washing story, and the mandate to “love one another” comes from the gospel of John, which is the traditional reading for tonight.

Jesus also shows us what God’s love looks like. But instead of wrapping a towel around his waist, Jesus hosts a meal, which had profound significance for his disciples.

The day itself had remarkable symbolic impact. It was Passover, the festival of unleavened bread, that time when they stopped what they were doing and remembered the story of Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt. But it was a terrible liberation.

If you remember the story of the Exodus, God sent 10 plagues to Egypt to harass Pharaoh into freeing the Hebrew slaves. And each plague was worse than the one that came before it. And as the plagues intensified, so did Pharaoh’s anger, and deeper he became entrenched in his position, taking out his fury on the Hebrew slaves.

So, God told the Hebrew people for each house to slaughter a lamb that was without blemish. And then to paint their doors with the lamb’s blood. The roasted lamb’s meat was to be eaten that night with bitter herbs to signify the bitterness of slavery, and pair the lamb with unleavened bread, bread that didn’t have time to rise,

because the fleeing slaves grabbed the bread and left when God told them to.

When the angel of death visited Egypt that night, the angel would see the lamb's blood on the doorposts, and then “pass over” that house, sparing them from death.

If the angel did NOT see lamb's blood on the house's doorpost, then the angel would kill that family's first born son.

The death of Pharaoh's first born son broke Pharaoh's resistance to freeing the slaves, and so he released the Hebrews from their bondage.

That was the story that they gathered to tell each other that night. It was a story as familiar to them as Christmas is to us. It was their foundational story, a story that shaped who they were, a story that they hoped would come alive in their story as well.

They knew oppression. They knew the frustration of making someone else rich while they toiled in poverty. They knew that their people struggled to find meaning in their hunger.

So this Passover story they had heard that night had immediate resonance. When Jesus took the bread and said the traditional blessing over it, a prayer that had been said for thousands of years, the familiarity of it I'm sure brought comfort and meaning.

Then instead of giving out the bread, Jesus turned the story around. He held up the bread so everyone could see it and said, "THIS is my body which is given for YOU. When you do this, remember me."

THIS is HIS body? Really? The bread? That's kinda gross. And weird. Not to mention a touch blasphemous.

Then Jesus grabbed the cup of wine, and again said the traditional familiar prayer, then held up the cup, showed it to everyone, and said "This cup that is poured out FOR YOU is the new covenant in my blood."

Whoa, hold on there Jesus there's a lot to unpack. We're not sure what you're talking about, but it kinda sounds like you're saying that the wine is your blood. Drinking blood? Is that something we do now?

And what's this bit about a new covenant? What's wrong with the old one?

But before the disciples could get their questions out, Jesus clearly had something else on his mind.

“But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!”

It’s curious that Jesus waits until AFTER supper to drop that bomb on his disciples. They probably thought the same thing too.

Why didn’t he tell them this BEFORE supper so they could deal with the perpetrator. If they had a rat in their midst shouldn’t he be taken out as quickly as possible? Why was he allowing someone who was going to throw him and them under the bus to eat at their table?

The disciples argued among themselves, pointing fingers at each other. Why wasn’t Jesus naming names? That would have been helpful.

And the disciples’ argument quickly devolved from trying to identify Jesus’ betrayer to a fight over who was greatest. This was not the disciples’ best moment. They could only think of themselves while Jesus’ mind was on his impending death.

But what they missed was that Jesus meant to wait until after supper to tell them that someone was going to betray him and them because he wanted the betrayer to eat with them still as a brother, and hear the same promises that he offered to everyone else. If Judas could still eat with Jesus then that's an invitation for anyone to join him at his table.

It was Jesus' love for his betrayer, and his way of demonstrating to his disciples that loving for enemies isn't just some abstract, feel-good spiritual saying. But real world, flesh and blood significance.

That's what Jesus was trying to show them. Everything he said about loving God, neighbour, and enemy came true at that moment.

Jesus is the Passover lamb whose blood the angel of death sees us on when we receive him in his body and blood, who then passes over us, saving us from the power of death.

When I was a pastor in Halifax, Nova Scotia, we started a Sunday evening contemplative service. Think candles, soft music, icons, and chanting in the dark. It was pretty informal, and attracted a diverse crowd. Not our regular transplants from Nova Scotia's south shore.

Many of the people who came to the service would never step foot in a Sunday morning service. This quiet, contemplative environment was the space they needed to connect with something they couldn't quite define.

Among them was Karen. Karen was a grad student in biology at Dalhousie University and a friend of Rebekah's, my wife at the time. Karen had a well-maintained intellectually hardened exterior that caused her to self-identify as an agnostic bordering on atheism.

Each week we served holy communion at this evening service, which was my way of introducing having the sacrament more often than we did.

I didn't get council's permission to provide the sacrament in these evening services, which was intentional. I didn't think the council had the authority to tell me, as their pastor, when I could and when I could not serve the sacrament.

But I got roundly scolded by some older members for not having a congregational vote on when to serve holy communion. Council defended my actions of providing the sacrament to people, because, that's, y'know, what I'm supposed to do.

And also, they defended me because of Karen. Karen, always the scientist, outwardly had some pretty harsh words about religion. She would tease me about believing in fairy tales, and ask questions about the validity of prayer. She was proud of her rational mind.

But she came to worship every Sunday evening. And not only that, she insisted on helping with communion every week. The chalice was her territory, and she didn't want to give it up. And so I let her serve the wine each week and listen to her say, "This is the blood of Christ which is shed for you" as she held out the cup for people to drink from

And she would receive the sacrament herself, even though she wasn't sure what she believed.

Rebekah, my spouse and co-pastor at the time, would occasionally tease her about "the scientist serving the chalice."

Karen would blush, then smile and say, "I dunno, there's just something beautiful about those words that I like saying them. And I like giving people the wine. I like giving people holy food."

That's the power of the sacrament. I see it all the time. Karen never became a member of the church and that

wasn't the point. For her the message had enough meaning that she would come back to it again and again. And her questions deepened. Her vision of the world deepened. For her, that was liberation.

I don't think there's anything magical about the sacrament itself. But it's the power of Jesus and his story that many people connect with.

Tonight, as you come forward to receive the sacrament, think about what you need liberation from. What is freedom for you?

And offer it to Jesus at this altar, as you receive him in the bread and the wine, the body and blood, who is the lamb of God, whose blood causes the power of sin and death to pass over you, and lead you into freedom.

May this be so among us. Amen.