

Maundy Thursday 2020 St. David's Episcopal (Matthew White)

As we reach Maundy Thursday, the fact that we are all still physically apart from each other is actually becoming very difficult for me. I've often felt that Maundy Thursday is one of the most emotional moments in the church year. Normally, we run through a whole gamut of emotions on this special Thursday, don't we? There is the beautiful symbolism of Christians coming together to wash each other's feet, in commemoration of Jesus' own actions. On this day when we remember Jesus' institution of the Eucharist, communion always feels extra special. And at the end, I always love how a hush seems to fall across the congregation when we strip the altar at the end of the service, leaving the church ready for Good Friday. And this year, while I am humbled and full of joy to be able to join you in virtual worship, I am going to miss so many of those beautiful symbols of Holy Week – the symbols that are provided not by our beautiful building or even by rites in a prayer book, but by the reality of Christians coming together for worship and fellowship.

We will be stripping the altar at the end of our service tonight, but many of those other powerful shared experiences are beyond our reach in a streaming service. I wish so much that I could have knelt down to wash someone's feet and have mine washed in return. I imagine I am not the only one who feels especially acutely the fact that it feels like a long, long time since I have received communion. Perhaps the last few weeks will provide a healthy reminder that the church isn't a building or an institution, but the people of God.

And indeed it does still feel so good that because of today's technology, we are still able to come here together in a spirit of love and faith.

After all on Maundy Thursday, what we remember is the way that Jesus chose to spend the final hours before the events of Good Friday. And it was a meal – a meal with his closest friends, the people that he loved.

Remembering this meal has been a central part of our worship for almost two thousand years. It is an old commemoration, perhaps the oldest part of our faith apart from our belief in Jesus himself. It is so old that even Paul of Tarsus, writing to the church in Corinth only about twenty years after the events of Good Friday, described it as old even then, a tradition that he had received, passed on in the spirit of the Lord.

Over the years, as Catholic and Orthodox and Protestant Christians, we have had different names for our commemorations: the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. Whatever we may call it, week after week, like Christians around the world, we gather in this sacred space of St. David's, around this holy table, to commemorate and reenact these events from so very long ago, this old story that reaches out to us in ever new ways.

At least we have until now. I realize that it is strange to be speaking about the origins of the Eucharist when we can't receive the Eucharist together.

What I have been thinking about getting ready for this sermon is the significance of sharing a meal together. Among many things the pandemic has changed is the way we eat and share meals.

Our readings tonight reflect on two different aspects of the meal Jesus ate with his disciples. The Gospel of John focuses on the deep love that Jesus and his followers shared. Jesus and his friends had gathered for the festival of Passover, the Jewish holiday marking the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. It might have been the night before Passover, according to John, or the first night of the Passover feast itself, according to the other Gospels, which we call the Synoptic Gospels or the Synoptics. The details of the actual timing aren't really that important. The important part of what John does recall is how Jesus, filled with love and wanting to teach his disciples an example of this love, knelt, like a servant, and washed their feet. Next year, I pray we will all gather in this church together and recreate that beautiful and powerful moment.

Like the synoptic Gospels, Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians recalls a different part of this meal. Paul recalls the very core of the story that we all hope we will all soon be able to reenact each Sunday once more. Jesus gathered at a table, with his disciples likely on either side of him, as was the custom of the time. He took bread, perhaps still warm from the ovens of Jerusalem's bakers, perhaps with a delicious crust like our own communion bread often has here at St. David's, and he handed the bread to his friends, telling them that it was his body they were eating. He took a cup of wine, like all Jews did on the feast of Passover, and then he promised them it would mark a new covenant in his blood.

And then he walked out into the darkness of the night, a night in which he would be betrayed at the hands of a trusted friend and follower, Judas Iscariot, whose motivations will always remain a mystery to us. In the end, Jesus would be turned over to the Romans, whose powerful empire controlled and oppressed the people of Palestine in this era. And at their hands, and the hands of those few religious and political elites who collaborated with them, he would be put to death, a brutal death on a cross, humiliated and suffering and alone.

We can't separate the way Jesus lived from the way Jesus died – all in faithfulness to God and to God's plan for the redemption not just of humanity but of the entire universe. In writing to the Corinthian Christians, Paul reflects on the fact that the cross overshadows every reenactment of the events of the Last Supper. Every time we bless bread and wine and share them as a community, Paul says, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. It is an act that in Greek is known as an *anamnesis*, a remembering – a remembering that just as Jesus lived for us, Jesus also died for us.

On this Maundy Thursday we can't do that together. So I'd like to spend a few minutes thinking about what we *can* do, what we *can* take from this holy day, as we move through the rest of

this Holy Week. And even though we are not receiving the Eucharist tonight, we are still commemorating it, and so I would like to keep the focus on meals.

One way to think about this is to consider the physical aspect of meals and then the spiritual aspect.

As I've said, in the midst of social distancing, the very way we eat and share food has changed. In many ways this has been difficult. We can't go into a restaurant for a quick bite with a friend. And we know how many waiters and others involved in the hospitality industry are suffering in the midst of all that is happening.

And yet in other ways, I've found that ongoing events have shifted my understanding of meals in positive ways. Like a lot of American families, I think over time Britt and the kids and I fell a bit away from the standard of shared family dinners.

And suddenly, that shared meal at the end of the day has become a powerful part of the structure that is helping us get through all that is happening. It is a time to relax in each other's company. Like Jesus with his disciples, we serve each other – helping to prepare food together, even as we offer emotional support to each other.

Over the coming days, as we move toward Easter, I would encourage you to think about how your own family can be intentional about the meals that we share. I know this is especially hard for people who live alone. One practice we have started at my other job is to enjoy "virtual" meals by eating lunch together with friends and colleagues through Zoom or Facebook.

And as we eat, let's remember everyone working in the food service industry – those who grow our food, those who package and deliver it, those who sell it in our grocery stores. These are suddenly our everyday heroes in a challenging time.

Now, if we can, let's think about the spiritual symbolism of meals. For we also come to church to feast on God's word, to join in a representation of that heavenly banquet that Jesus has promised us.

Right now, we aren't together, but we are still powerfully connected to each other by bonds of love. They are truly the same bonds of love that united Jesus with his disciples. And while we may not be able to literally wash each other's feet tonight, we still have the ability to reach out in that spirit of love.

It is so important for us to remain united as a church family. I am glad so many of us have been able to attend our streaming services, our Wednesday bible studies on Zoom, and our new "virtual" adult forum sessions.

I would encourage all of us to be mindful of just picking up the phone or getting on Facebook to check on other members of our church family. In the midst of this moment in history, there are a lot of people suffering. People suffering physically, financially, emotionally. And a simple

phone call, email, or Facebook message could make a huge difference for someone who is having a rough day or a rough week. Indeed, the past two weeks I have seen many examples of random acts of kindness, whether online, or standing six feet away from other people in the grocery or the drugstore. It even gives me hope that as our society comes out of the challenges we are facing in 2020, perhaps we will be just a little bit kinder, a little quicker to help others in need.¹⁰²⁰

Let's all hold onto hope. As the shadows lengthen tonight, we will move into the darkness of Good Friday. And at the end of our service, as I've said, we will strip all the beautiful decorations from our sanctuary, leaving a table still holy but just as bare as the hill of Golgotha, taking the linens away as if to become the burial shrouds of our Savior. We go from high to low, from light into darkness. Like Jesus after the Last Supper, for a moment in spirit we leave behind the warmth of love and fellowship, and go into the darkness of the night, preparing for the desolation of Good Friday.

And it is right that we should stay there a while, lingering on the barren hill of Golgotha and in the silence of a graveyard where Jesus would rest in a borrowed tomb. After all, we do live in a world that is full of many kinds of darkness. People are suffering. We do feel fear. We're not sure what each new day may hold.

But even in the darkness of tonight and tomorrow, we retain a spark of hope. That is the spark that gives life to our souls and comfort to weary hands and hearts. We are on a path toward Easter. Tonight and tomorrow, we'll find ourselves spiritually somewhere between the shadow of a cross, and the glow coming from the opened door of an empty tomb. We look back to the death of a Savior. We look forward to a new world where the entire universe will be redeemed and nobody and nothing will be left separated from God's love.

We are Christians because we believe. We believe not in what we see but in what we hope for – a world redeemed, tears wiped away, love triumphant – a world where life is victorious over death, love over hatred, faith over fear.