

Maundy Thursday ≅ Year A
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
March 24, 2005

A Mystery About Love...

Lessons for the Day

- ✧ Exodus 12:1-14a
- ✧ Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
- ✧ I Corinthians 11:23-26 (27-32)
- ✧ Luke 22:14-30

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator**, **Christ our Savior**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and empowers us to love and to serve them both. Let's collect ourselves in the presence of God, and wait on God's word for us today . . . (Pause)

Amen.

I want to **take you back in memory for just a moment -- back to that Christmas Eve** (maybe in your childhood) when **you were more excited than you had ever been in your entire life**. Think back with me . . . back to that long-ago (or perhaps not-so-long-ago) time . . . (Pause)

For some of us, this was the year we waited for that long-anticipated puppy. For others, it was the year we got a toy or game we wanted so badly we could not contain ourselves. Perhaps for some of us it was the Christmas Eve when we awaited the return of a long-absent loved one, or the birth of a new baby into our families.

Or maybe it was a Christmas Eve when we were particularly attuned to God's great gift to us in the Christ child -- a season when our joy and anticipation were almost palpable. We just **could not contain ourselves**.

How different that warm and happy memory is from our memories of this night -- of Maundy Thursday -- of **Good Friday Eve**. This is an eve that -- at least in my memory -- looms dark and foreboding, stark and forbidding.

As a middle-school-aged child -- **when I first came to some adult understanding of what actually happened on Good Friday** -- I thought *we ought to call tomorrow **Bad** Friday*. The Friday we await certainly wasn't good for Jesus. And how could the day on which we remember the killing of God's own son be called "good" Friday? It seemed wrong to me that Jesus had to die, even to give me a gift as great as salvation.

So what do we take away from Maundy Thursday -- this eve of Good Friday that looks to us so much like **Bad** Friday?

I once knew a man who wanted to write a book about the Saints of the church -- he said he was going to call his book *"God's Greatest Hits: Lessons from the Lives of the Saints."*

I thought of my friend when reading the **two Gospel Lessons** appointed for today, because both of these lessons surely qualify for listing among God's greatest hits. In the **lesson from John, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, and then instructs them to do likewise**. Christ calls the disciples to **move out into the world in humility and service**. It is a call Christ makes anew to every generation in every time and place, and it is a call we hear echoing in the foot washing we do tonight.

In the second Gospel lesson -- the **lesson from the twenty-second chapter of Luke** -- we see **Christ instituting the Lord's supper**. And it is on the Lord's Supper that I want to focus for a moment.

Here's the question I want us to reflect upon: "What is it, exactly, we are doing when we celebrate the Eucharist?" What are we doing, and how does it "work"? -- If "work" is even an appropriate word to use when speaking of the efficacy of the Sacrament.

What is it that is going on in the Eucharist? The **range of understanding** about what -- exactly -- is going on in the Eucharist is **enormous**.

On the one hand, we have communities of faith that rarely -- if ever -- observe the Lord's supper. When these faith communities **do** have the Lord's supper, **it is a "remembrance" meal only** -- they remember what Jesus and the disciples did, but there is **no understanding that God is present in the sacrament in any particular or unique way**.

On the other end of the continuum we have faith communities that believe in **trans**substantiation. Their sacramental theology proposes that -- when the **gifts of bread and wine are consecrated -- they actually become the body and blood of Christ**.

There are also **myriad points in-between** these two poles. There's John **Calvin's belief in what he called the "real presence"** of Christ in communion. And then there's the position advocated by many Episcopalians -- a **position captured in the word consubstantiation**.

Consubstantiation -- incorporating the word-components "con" meaning "with" and "substantiation" meaning "substance" -- asserts that the **elements used in communion are both blood and wine, both body and bread simultaneously**.

So what is the Eucharist, and how does it work?

In the end, the **Eucharist** -- like so many things in life that matter deeply (think of love, for instance, or even of despair) -- **is a profound mystery**. And like **most authentic mysteries, it cannot be entered into by a direct, frontal, intellectual approach**.

Some years ago I was visiting with a clergyman-acquaintance and the conversation strayed to systematic theology. After a brief reflection, he made an observation that has stuck with me through the years.

Here's his observation about the study of systematic theology, "I haven't got a lot of use for systematic theology, because I think it vastly overestimates the capacity of human beings to wrap their finite minds around an infinite God."

Perhaps Eucharist is like that. Perhaps we **can't understand the Eucharist by thinking about it**. Like love, perhaps **Eucharist is best understood in the experiencing . . .**

I want to tell you a story about **experiencing the Eucharist**. Listen with me; this **story captures the essence of the Eucharist . . .**

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, right here in Winston-Salem, **there lived a man**. That is, **if you could call the life this man had "living" in any meaningful sense of that word**.

Oh -- **he had all the things he once thought he wanted**. He had been reasonably successful in his work, he was married to the love of his life, he had good friends and was active in his church. He was healthy and vigorous and bright. No major disasters had befallen him . . .

But **somehow all of life had lost meaning for him, and the man in our story was deeply depressed**.

This was not "sadness" -- **this was a deep, aching depression. Everything was a struggle -- like running through cold molasses**. Things that once brought joy meant nothing. The man had to exhort himself to make it from breakfast to 10AM, and then exhort himself once again to make it from midmorning to noon.

Or -- as he expressed it to me -- "It was a fulltime job not to kill myself!"

This man was many things, but he was not a quitter. So he **sought refuge from his depression**. He visited a psychiatrist. Nothing. He tried anti-depressants. Nothing. He met with friends in restaurants and they sat in silence -- him weeping and them eating. And still he was depressed.

He was at his wit's end -- losing ground in the fight to save his own life. And then he noticed something strange . . .

Though not a member of Saint Paul's, the man in our story was a **regular attendee at the Wednesday afternoon Eucharist**. And he **began to notice** that -- while **at Eucharist -- he was not depressed**.

Every hour of every other day he was depressed. He was **depressed as he lay sleepless in his bed at 3AM**. He was **depressed as he slogged through his workout at the "Y"**. He was **depressed while trying to choke down** small portions of the foods he used to love. But **he was not depressed at the Eucharist**.

Our friend decided to repeat the experiment -- he began to **come to the Tuesday Eucharist** as well. **Same effect: no depression.** He became a regular at **Sunday morning Eucharist** and it, too, had the **same effect -- no depression.** And he wondered what the heck was going on . . .

Our friend **took this story to his spiritual director** -- a woman who had sat and wept with him through the long and aching months of his sadness -- and **he told her what was going on.** He expressed his puzzlement --

Why -- of all places -- would the depression lift while at the Eucharist?

His spiritual director was a wise woman -- depression was no stranger to her; she had tasted it herself. She looked at him in wonder, and then she said:

"All your life you have **hungered for someone to love you enough to die for you.** At the **Eucharist you are in the presence of Someone who did.** *I'd be surprised if you didn't feel better!!*

And then he got it: the **Eucharist** -- like love -- ***is* a mystery.** In fact, the **Eucharist is a mystery about love.** **Easter** brings us **salvation and full communion with God in the future;** the Lord's Supper (**the Eucharist**) **brings us a chance to rest** -- here and now -- **in the presence of Jesus,** in the presence of Someone who loved us enough to die for us.

And **we rest in Christ's presence not just for rest's sake. We rest also to gather strength to go out into the world** to wash feet, to bind up wounds, to feed the hungry, and to proclaim the good news of Christ's love to a hurting and hungry world.

Come rest in the presence of Someone who loves you enough to die for you. Gather strength to go forth from here and serve. "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving."

BCP, Eucharist Rite I, page 338

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