

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
Maundy Thursday – April 6, 2023
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35
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Our first lesson from the book of Exodus describes God's instructions to the Jewish people for keeping the festival of Passover. We read it on Maundy Thursday because it orients us to what is about to take place on Good Friday – a sacrifice. Not the sacrifice of a lamb, but of a sinless man, Jesus, the Messiah. Not the unwilling sacrifice of a dumb animal, but the willing sacrifice of the Son of God, the Lamb of God. As the priest says when the bread of the Eucharist is broken, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."

Jesus knows that his death is imminent, that he is alone with his disciples for the last time. This is a time for total clarity, a time for Jesus to do and say what his disciples will remember and pass on to other followers of Jesus, to us.

In our lesson from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians we read the words that are the basis of all Christian rituals of the Last Supper. St. Paul writes that he is passing on to Jesus' followers what he "received from the Lord." Whenever we gather and celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we hear what Jesus did and what Jesus said as he shared this last meal with his closest followers.

On the night before he died, Jesus' first act was to give thanks to God. He then took bread and broke it. He taught us to see the bread as his body, the body he was about to give, to be broken on the cross. Jesus took the cup of wine and taught us to see the wine as his blood, the blood he was about to shed on the cross. Jesus commanded his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup for the remembrance of him.

This concept of remembrance is deep. As we understand it in the Anglican tradition, remembrance is much more than merely recalling an event of the past. It is incorporating the event, participating in the event, becoming the event. In the church we refer to ourselves collectively as the body of Christ, and each one of us is a member of the body of Christ. Our participation in the Holy Eucharist signifies our willingness to be broken and poured out to show the world the love of God, as Jesus did.

On the last night of his life Jesus also taught his disciples about love by washing their feet. Jesus knew that soon he would be betrayed by one of his closest friends and followers and that he would lose his life. John writes of Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1b). And this is how Jesus showed his love. He washed his disciples’ feet and explained what he had done, so that there would be no misunderstanding. Jesus showed his followers, one more time, how the love of God is revealed in human interaction. He had given them a lesson in humility and service and instructed them to follow his example.

This is Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” is an unusual word. The root of the word is the Latin word “*mandatum*,” which means “command.” The English word we are most familiar with that comes from the same root is the word “mandate,” an authoritative command or instruction. The immediate reference that the word “Maundy” points to is the conclusion of the passage from the Gospel of John that we just heard, when Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

We have gathered here today because God has called us to follow Jesus as our Lord. This is a very special day in the church year. In our ritual of hand washing, we remember how Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and what that meant for all of Jesus’ followers. In our celebration of Holy Communion, we remember the Passover meal shared by Jesus with his closest followers on the evening before his crucifixion, when his body will be broken and his blood poured out. We recall how Jesus gave thanks to God at that holy meal.

We have remembered our Lord’s words and actions – serving others, giving thanks to God, commanding his followers to love others as he loved them – even to the end of his life. We have been given the opportunity to learn about God’s love from the words and actions of our Teacher. And we must always remember that Jesus said, “If you know these things” – these things pertaining to God’s love – “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

I pray that what we hear and do today will help us to know and receive the love of God more deeply. I pray that what we hear and do today will strengthen our love for God and guide our love for one another, in Jesus’ name. Amen.