

Final Instructions

John 13:1-17, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2010

I.

Tonight we continue our journey toward the sorrow of Good Friday and the joy of Easter. But we're not here just to get some preliminary matters out of the way. Maundy Thursday is more than a warm-up act for what follows tomorrow and Sunday. Our worship here is an essential part of how we know and understand our Lord and Savior during this Holy Week.

The name of this service gives us a clue as to its nature. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum," whose English rendering is "mandate." Maundy thus signifies an instruction, or a command.

And two things Jesus did at the Last Supper so long ago were of that nature. First, he washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us, in the ways of servanthood and humility. He demonstrated that his love knows no limits.

Second, he explained that the bread and wine of his final meal were his body and blood given for us. And he commanded his disciples, and all people for all time, to continually celebrate his sacrifice in remembrance of him.

We will follow both of Jesus' instructions this evening. But first, I would like to speak briefly about our foot washing service, and then reflect in greater detail upon our sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

II.

Let's begin with some background on the practice of foot washing. In first century Palestine people wore sandals and walked on dusty roads. When they arrived at their destinations it was traditional, and probably necessary, for them to wash their feet.

Socially, however, it was regarded as a menial task that never would be done by the host of a gathering, or the owner of the house, or anyone in a position of authority. People either washed their own feet, or it was done by servants.

But yet, Jesus, the Son of God, washed the disciples feet on the last night of his life to show them humility. He did it to demonstrate things he had said earlier about how the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and that those who wish to be great must first be servants.

As a result, this story is not really about dirty feet. The disciples probably had washed their feet earlier when they came in the room. This is one of those classic cases where actions speak louder than words. And yet, Jesus' reasons for doing it were more important than the act itself.

That's because in that transcendent moment Jesus turned tradition upside down. He showed that the world's values were not God's values. He made it clear that the pride and vanity of worldly things eventually must give way to the humility and selflessness of godly things.

And in that simple act of washing the disciples' feet Jesus exemplified two fundamental principles of Christian life. First, as shown in his service to his friends, we also are called to be of service to others. Second, as is evident from his exchange with Peter, it is important that we willingly receive those same offerings of kindness when given to us.

After I finish this homily we will have a foot washing service right here where some people will act as representatives on behalf of the congregation. I understand that others might remain

as observers, and that's fine. Participation is optional, although anyone who wants to come forward will be welcome to do so.

III.

Then, shortly after we finish with our feet, we will minister to our hearts and our souls. We will celebrate the Eucharist in obedience to our Lord's command, and in thanksgiving for his sacrifice.

And this takes us to the reading we heard from First Corinthians. The words were familiar weren't they? This is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me. The same words are in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We say them in our Eucharistic prayers at least three times a week here at St. Thomas, and frequently more often than that.

So, we heard the words, and we know what Jesus said. But why did he say them? Why did he use the imagery of bread and wine? What was behind all this?

We probably know it began with the Jewish Passover. The Last Supper itself was a traditional Passover meal. Jesus and the disciples, as well Jews everywhere else in Palestine and the ancient world, were celebrating God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt. They had done so on that night for over one thousand years.

And we probably remember that their freedom from slavery was hard won. Pharaoh repeatedly had refused the demands of Moses for freedom for his people, and each time God brought some plague or disaster upon Egypt to force Pharaoh's hand.

And finally, the last disaster did it. Suddenly one night the first born of all living things in Egypt died, and Pharaoh relented. But the first born of the Hebrews did not die. That's because God told them to place the blood of a newly slaughtered lamb on their doorposts, and the angel of death passed over those homes.

And after delivering his people, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai that if they were obedient to him they would be blessed, and would be the light to bring the rest of the world to faith in God. Today this is called the Old Covenant.

History shows, however, that the covenant did not serve its purpose. Those events are another sermon. But God tried again. He was faithful to humanity. Jesus Christ came to restore our relationship with God. Theologians speculate about whether God planned it that way from the beginning, or intended it as a mid-course correction, but that also is beside the point tonight.

For our purposes Jesus knew that he was going to die a brutal death, and that in a few hours he would be arrested and convicted in a bogus midnight trial. Jesus also knew that the coming horror was his destiny, and that it would establish a New Covenant between God and humanity.

And that New Covenant is God's promise to all people for all time that if we are penitent and accept Jesus as our Savior and believe that he died for us, then we will be forgiven our sins and have eternal life in God's presence.

So the Hebrew Passover celebration of the Old Covenant made room for the New Covenant that undergirds Christian faith. That does not mean the New Covenant supersedes the old. The Hebrew people still are among God's chosen. But it does mean the biblical nation of Israel now is called to manifest itself through the church of Jesus Christ as the light to bring all people to faith.

And just as the people of the Old Covenant were saved by the blood of the Passover lamb, so also are we saved by the blood of another lamb, who was the Son of God. That's what Jesus instructed his disciples, and all people for all time, to remember at that Last Supper. He said

that the bread they ate was his body, soon to be crucified for us, and the wine they drank was his blood, soon to be poured out for us.

IV.

So, how does our Lord ask us to understand what happened so long ago on that Passover night in the upper room? There are two parts to this larger question. First, how do we treat the bread and the wine? Second, what does the Eucharist mean in our lives?

As to the bread and wine, it's important to understand that Jesus said this is my body, this is my blood. He did not say that it symbolized his body or blood. He was not using figures of speech. On the other hand he also did not mean that the bread and wine were literally identical with his body and blood. His intent, however, was much more than merely symbolic.

Different denominations understand Christ's meaning at this Last Supper in different ways. In the Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Church world wide, we generally subscribe to the idea of the "Real Presence."

This means that Jesus Christ actually is present in the bread and wine. But we do not go so far as to say that the bread and wine actually and physically are transformed into Christ's body and blood while retaining the outward appearances of bread and wine. We believe they begin the Eucharistic celebration as bread and wine, and remain as bread and wine.

However, after the bread and wine are consecrated something happens. Jesus Christ is present here at the Holy Table because of what began at the Last Supper and continued for the next three days. It's a spiritual thing and not just symbolic. He truly is among us, although we don't know how to explain it in human words. It is a mystery and will remain so this side of eternity.

The second question, the meaning of the Eucharist in our lives, is not so mysterious. We know that at baptism we are freed from the guilt of original sin and cleansed. And we also know that notwithstanding the grace of baptism we continue to disregard God's will for us. But that does not mean that something went wrong at our baptisms, or that something did not take.

Rather it confirms that we are not perfect, we are fallible, and we still do things that separate us from God. That's one of the reasons why we have the Eucharist. We confess our sins during the service and are cleansed. It is not just a ritual. The Blood of Christ was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins, and if we sincerely seek forgiveness then it is granted. Regular participation in the Eucharist restores us, and prepares us again to walk in the light of Christ.

V.

So, this night overflows with meaning. We sense the spiritual significance of Jesus' washing the disciples feet. And we share the spiritual reality of his presence in the Eucharist.

As we continue through this Holy Week, we will experience the sorrow, sadness, and introspection of Good Friday. It begins when we strip the altar. And then comes the joy and celebration of Easter. But tonight, Maundy Thursday, is a night of humility, service, and sharing in our Lord's presence. It truly leads to the meaning of Good Friday and the hope of Easter. *Amen.*