

Sermon: Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35, Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | April 4, 2023

This evening I want to share some thoughts on that first Maundy Thursday dinner. That first dinner is basis of all the Maundy Thursday dinners that we do each year at church. Four things briefly about that first dinner.

One: That first Maundy Thursday dinner was the last dinner of Jesus. Imagine knowing that a meal was your last. The meal automatically acquires a completely different meaning and significance. After that dinner, Jesus would go out, be arrested, tried, and the next day he would be crucified. Jesus knew this was his last dinner. But what is significant is that he was eager to have this last dinner with his disciples. In the gospel according to Luke, Jesus says, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." This is my last meal and I want to have it with you. He eagerly desired to have it with them.

Second: That first Maundy Thursday dinner would reveal that Jesus was offering his body and blood to all. St Paul says, "that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." At that dinner Jesus would institute the Holy Communion that we participate in every Sunday and whenever we

gather to worship. So Maundy Thursday shapes our worship every time we gather. Jesus was showing that he was pouring out his entire being for all, to nourish, to preserve, and to bring all into fellowship and mysterious communion with him.

Third: That first Maundy Thursday dinner Jesus would teach his disciples the most important human action of all: service to others. At that dinner Jesus knew he was returning to God. And so, what was the most important action he wished to do for his disciples as the last action he could do as a free person? He wanted to wash their feet, a sign of serving in humility. Remember, this included washing the feet of the disciple who would betray him. And yet Jesus goes about washing all his disciples' feet. When he comes to Peter, Peter cries out "You shall never wash my feet. After all you are my master, my Lord, my Teacher." While in some cultures the challenge is to learn to humble oneself to wash the feet of others, in other cultures the challenge might be to humble oneself to accept the washing of one's feet by others. To serve and to accept service are both challenging in different ways. To help and to receive help are both needed. But unless we do to each other what Jesus did to his disciples, Jesus says, we have no part with him.

And the fourth and final thing: That first Maundy Thursday dinner Jesus gave a new command: a command to love. The word "Maundy" in the name Maundy Thursday is a shortened form of the Latin *mandatum*, which means "command." As the dinner comes to an end

Jesus says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer... Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The basis of this commandment to love is the example of love that God himself shows. In fact, the New Testament says that 'God is love.' Our presiding Bishop, Michael Curry loves to say: "If it is not about love, it is not about God." Since God is love, it indeed is true that if it's not about love it cannot be about God. God is the source and definition of love.

Dear siblings in Christ, this evening we are remembering one of the most significant dinners in human history. A dinner that is central to our faith, central to our lives as Christians. This dinner was so significant that it could be called by many names: The Last Supper (for it was Jesus's last meal); the dinner of Holy Communion (for at this dinner the Holy Communion was instituted); the dinner of service (for at this dinner Jesus taught us to wash each other's feet); and finally, the dinner of the new command (Maundy dinner, the command to love).

What ties this multifaceted significance of the dinner is love itself. The gospel according to John opens this dinner story with the words: "Having loved his own...he loved them till the end." That's the story of this dinner, he loved them till the end. He loves us till the end. His love went to the extent of accepting death on the cross.

That first Maundy Thursday did not go well for Jesus. Jesus would be disturbed by the fact that one of his own would betray him. He would go out that night to pray with anguish, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done." Following the prayer, he would be arrested, brought to a kangaroo trial. His disciples will flee, and Peter will deny him repeatedly. That's how Thursday would end. But Jesus would love till the end.

Amen.