

April 14, 2022
Maundy Thursday
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Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Luke 22:14-30

This evening we mark the beginning of the Easter Triduum, the great “three days” of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. Today, tomorrow, and Saturday, we mark time at the same pace as Jesus. Therefore, for Jesus and for us, today is the day before the crucifixion.

Because it's the day before the crucifixion, Maundy Thursday offers us a Gospel lesson taken from a version of the “last supper.” We usually hear from John, in particular the part about Jesus washing the disciples' feet. In this way Jesus calls the disciples to serve others, and we exemplify that by washing one another's feet.

We haven't yet returned to our pre-pandemic practice of foot washing, so tonight I substituted for John the optional reading from Luke. It centers us on the meal itself, during which Jesus says, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” These words are closely echoed in the reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Luke and Paul together offer good evidence that: one, Jesus actually did something very like this; and two, from the beginning, it was important to Jesus' followers. Thus it remains; even now, our Eucharistic prayers always include a version of those words. There is a special name for every bit of liturgical minutiae; the name for this part of the Eucharistic prayer is the “words of institution.” Let's return to the collect of the day, which always functions to summarize the overall theme of the liturgy. The one for this evening said that Jesus, “on the night before he suffered, *instituted* the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.”

While Jesus definitely instituted something, only later would it be termed a *sacrament*. There's a branch of theological inquiry called sacramental theology. As you can guess, it's all about the theology of the sacraments. This is not just an intellectual exercise, because it often relates directly to what we do in church, things that we often embody. Sacramental theology is woven through our worship, though it's sometimes quite nuanced. One area of nuance is the role of the priest in sacramental worship.

Let's dig deeper here, because the words of institution are a particularly sticky part of the Eucharistic prayer. While I say those words, I elevate first the bread and then the wine. Other priests add a variety of flourishes, but I do the minimum required by the *Book of Common Prayer*. That's because elevating the gifts here is actually misleading, for at least two reasons.

First: the gesture of elevation infers that something special is happening, but it's not. In the Episcopal Church, there's no magic moment when bread and wine become body and blood. Instead, the entire Eucharistic prayer is necessary to consecrate the elements. It's all necessary; it's all of a whole.

Second, imagine me elevating the gifts, while saying the words of Jesus. This action infers, to use a Latin phrase, that I am acting *in persona Christi*, that is, in the person of Christ. That's not what accepted sacramental theology says is happening. Instead, to use another Latin phrase, I am acting *in persona ecclesiae*, in the person of the church. In short, I am acting not as Christ, but as a member of the community. Let me be very clear and succinct here: *I* preside but *we* celebrate. Together *we* create the sacrament which is both the symbol and the carrier of God's effectual grace.

I admit it: I'm a liturgy geek. One reason I'm a liturgy geek is because, for me, digging deeper into what we do, quite paradoxically makes it both more transparent and more mysterious. It helps me unpack the power the liturgy, even if I will never truly understand it. And all that reminds me why we do it, and why I love it.

The truth is, the pandemic has left me questioning much of the sacramental theology that I have taken for granted. Let's think back two years, to the beginning of the pandemic, when churches first stopped worshipping in person. People were in crisis and wanted communion. Some priests decided to preside over communion on Zoom church, allowing every streamed-in person to provide their own bread. They offered the Eucharistic prayer as usual, and presumably the sacrament was consecrated for the folks at home. The Bishops of the Episcopal Church quickly discussed this and stopped it with a firm NO. I agreed with their decision. Two years later, I still agree, but I also think it raises important questions that we are yet far away from hashing out.

That's because, in another paradox, the pandemic has been for us both a *cause of limitation* and a *vehicle of expansion*. We couldn't be with other people in the same physical space, but we could participate in online events with folks around the globe. Two years ago on Good Friday, I streamed a magnificent live performance of Bach's St. John Passion during which the principal soloist stood nearly atop Bach's tomb in Leipzig. Less encouraging is how we have also all been subject to a pandemic of misinformation. There are forces in the world interested only in deploying new technology in the old pursuit of power and domination.

Maybe this is a good place to return to the gospel. I'm going to risk offering a throw-away comment here. While I acknowledge that I am sinful, I don't believe that Jesus died for my sins, or yours, either. I think Jesus died because the forces of power and domination could not tolerate what he was doing. Knowing what was coming, Jesus didn't pick up arms. Instead, he enjoyed a simple meal with an unlikely group of ragtag people whom he loved, not because they wouldn't disappoint him, but because even they—especially they—were worthy of love. It was and is about a meal, and about so much more. No matter what, he said, keep on doing it, and remember me when you do, because it changes the world. And so we do, and so it does.

The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin that literally means *something made holy*. Together, we take an ordinary thing, and set it apart as sacred. Interestingly, the word used for sacraments in the Greek Orthodox tradition is the Greek word *mysterion*, which means simply *mystery*. In the Greek tradition, the sacraments are called the holy mysteries. We actually heard this, too, in the collect of the day. Let's hear it again: "Almighty Father, whose dear Son, on the night before he suffered, instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood: Mercifully grant that we may receive it thankfully in remembrance of Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life."

Tonight, as we begin marking time with Jesus, we know what's coming. In a few minutes we will dine with him and our friends; tomorrow we'll be among those who abandoned him on his way to the cross; on Saturday we will celebrate his resurrection. You'll note that, at the end of tonight's service, there is no dismissal. There's no dismissal on Good Friday, either. The next dismissal comes at the end of the Easter Vigil. Until then, we are continually in worship. You might spend some time over the next couple of days pondering what that might mean to you. I understand it as an invitation to witness to the mystery of holiness present at all times in all places, even at a death on a cross. If we take that with us, even far beyond Easter, we need never be afraid.