April 1, 2021
Maundy Thursday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

As most of you know, my wife, Jakki, and I have an adult daughter who lives in New Haven. Despite her relative proximity, because of the pandemic, and because we have been so very careful, it has been more than a year since we have been closer to her than six feet away—more than a year since we have touched her—with one exception. A few weeks ago, we were all outside on a windy day, and we posed standing in a tight row for a photograph. Without thinking, I did the usual, casual, unthinking thing: I reached my arm around her. It was when my hand touched the far said of her waist that I realized with a start what I had done, and I nearly jerked my arm away. Instead, in a nanosecond, I consciously stopped myself and decided to stay still rather than disrupt the photograph, something I usually do by blinking, and which after all took only a couple of seconds.

I actually felt bad about it, because I had transgressed the rules, and because I had touched here but Jakki hasn't. I later realized that, besides those brief seconds of contact, Jakki is almost certainly the only person I have touched in over a year. Thank goodness I have her, for this and a multitude of reasons. As a pastor, my attention to the human need for touch has arrived mostly in connection to elderly people bereft of it. Resting my hand on the arm of someone in a nursing home invariably sets me to wondering when someone last touched them with kindness. Misconduct by clergy and others has put us all on notice, and still the appropriate exchange of physical affection is nearly as necessary to life as food and water.

This week I found myself thinking about what Maundy Thursday used to look like at St. Thomas's Church. Doing so gave me a succession of mental startled jerks. Imagine the unventilated Church lounge packed with unmasked people. [Ugh.] Imagine uncovered pots of soup and loaves of bread, with shared serving utensils but no hand sanitizer. [Ugh.] Imagine singing, and foot washing and exchanging the peace and sharing a single communion cup. [Ugh.] Imagine.

In the entire liturgical year, Maundy Thursday may be the worship service most illustrative of the pandemic sacrifices it has been necessary to make. Of course, it's not only about worship, just as worship is not only about worship. In worship we mark as sacred certain representative objects and activities pulled from everyday life: storytelling, singing, serving, and, perhaps most centrally, eating. Seeing these things as sacred *inside* church teaches us to recognize them as sacred *outside* church. For this list, let us not forget touch, and not just through the exchange of the peace. Have you ever noticed that the priest touches the bread and the wine during the Eucharistic prayer? The rules say that the priest must touch them for them to be consecrated by the Holy Spirit.

Maundy Thursday has many themes, but the one most emphasized is Jesus' establishment of the sacrament of Holy Communion, also known as the Eucharist to Episcopalians, and as the Lord's Supper to other Protestants. That's another thing we haven't had in over a year.

Tonight's reading from John is from Jesus' last supper with the disciples. We got just the beginning of what will be a very long night. From where we left off, he'll give them a five-chapter monologue, one that basically boils down to love. And then he'll leave for the garden, which is where we'll pick up the story tomorrow.

On Maundy Thursday in a usual year, after communion we go into the church for the stripping of the altar, which leaves the entire sanctuary bare of ornamentation. I put the leftover communion, which is reserved for Good Friday, on the altar in the Lady Chapel. Imagine there the glass ciborium of wafers and the glass cruet of wine, together with a simple cross, the sanctuary candle, and a vase of flowers. There's a phrase for this Maundy Thursday–to–Good Friday setup: it's called the "altar of repose." Some churches decorate their altar of repose with elaborate flower and candle arrangements. Some churches maintain an all-night vigil with parishioners taking shifts singly or in pairs. The idea is to stay awake with Jesus, in the way that the disciples failed to that first fateful Maundy Thursday night. If Maundy Thursday is most illustrative of our pandemic sacrifices, sitting vigil at the altar of repose is perhaps most illustrative of our pandemic life. It feels a little like that's what we've been doing for the past year.

On Tuesday I did a Zoom clergy day with my colleagues from around Connecticut. We Christians place heavy emphasis on the Hebrew Scripture story of Exodus during our observation of Holy Week and Easter. It made sense that our presenter offered a meditation in which he compared our pandemic time to the Israelites in the wilderness. He noted that it took forty years of wandering to prepare them for entering the Promised Land, and during that time God sustained them with the grace of manna. He suggested that the pandemic has been our own time of wilderness preparation, and then asked us to consider this question: Over the last year, what is the manna that God has given you?

That's not a bad question, and still that's where he lost me. Admittedly, I'm always a bit of a contrarian. The thing is, since only a few weeks into the pandemic, well-meaning churchy folks have been asking other well-meaning church folks some variation of the question: What are the surprise gifts we have been given during this time that we will want to take with us? Maybe you're hearing a similar question in your life contexts. Perhaps it's just me, but I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about the gifts of the pandemic, especially during Holy Week.

Also this week, I listened to a podcast episode titled "The Dangers of Toxic Positivity."[1] It was a conversation between two PhDs who research human behavior and emotions. Their overall point was the importance of noticing the full variety of our own human emotions, with that being the key to individual and societal well-being.

Thinking about that question about manna, here's where my mind went: God had the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years so that those who had been held in slavery could die off. This freed the rest from the burden of that memory holding them back. The question I began to ask myself was this: What yet must die off?

Tonight, we interrupt the headlong rush to the next best thing, so that we might stop right here with this hard thing. Before our altars of repose real or imaginary, we sit vigil with Jesus, noticing what comes—not with judgment, but with observation. Thus we begin our observance of the Three Great Days—the Holy Triduum—by remembering and wondering and *feeling*.

Notes

[1] "Brené with Dr. Susan David on The Dangers of Toxic Positivity," a two-part episode of the podcast *Dare to Lead with Brené Brown*, which first aired on March 1 and March 8, 2021. Available on Spotify.