

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
April 14, 2022
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

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

On this night 40 years ago, I stood in a pew at St. John's Episcopal Church and sang the processional hymn we sang this evening – *O Sacred Head, Sore Wounded*.

When it was done, I wiped tears from my eyes, closed the hymnal, kissed the spine and sat down to watch as the Maundy Thursday service transpired before me. I was there in Thanksgiving for a gift the Holy Spirit had given me that afternoon – Sobriety.

The gift had always been there before me, but I had never been ready to receive it.

That afternoon I surrendered and accepted what I had so yearned for – to be beloved of God.

That divine gift – to know that we, each and every one of us, are beloved of God – is there for the taking on this most holy of nights. We are to just reach out and embrace it.

Tonight begins the Triduum, the holiest days of the holiest week of the Christian year.

The Paschal Triduum comprises the “three days” of the passion, the death and the resurrection of our Lord and Savior.

The Paschal Triduum is one extended liturgy in three distinct parts:
It begins with Maundy Thursday, resumes with Good Friday,
and ends at the Easter Vigil.

Maundy is a word that encompasses the washing of the disciple's feet by Jesus, but comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means commandment as Jesus says at the end of the Gospel: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

The scene we see in the Gospel of John tonight is the Last Supper. In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke this dinner is the Passover, the Jewish observance of the night on which the Angel of Death passed over the Hebrews and took the lives of the first born males of the land of Egypt.

From that night for the next 40 years, the people will journey through the desert on their way to the promised land.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, this gathering is when Jesus institutes the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Holy Communion to feed our souls with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation.

We are reminded of the Eucharist in the epistle reading of St. Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth.

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, 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."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

In the Gospel of John, however, we are given the opportunity to begin to comprehend the Eucharist in light of Jesus' sacrifice and his new commandment "that you love one another as I have loved you."

The disciples have followed Jesus from hither to yon. He is their teacher, their master. And yet at the end of dinner, he wraps a towel around his waist and kneels before each of them to wash their feet.

This is what the house slave would have done as the master greeted his guests before dinner. No wonder Peter is upset. This is just NOT done. And yet Jesus does it. Jesus shows us that to be a leader in the church, one must be a servant.

Growing up service was never the issue for me. Our family was at church Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening – and throw in youth group Saturdays – and for two weeks every summer – every night for Revival. Back then anything the church did, we were involved.

Given that level of commitment in my youth, I don't suppose it's surprising that when I graduated from high school I enlisted in the Air Force and even volunteered to serve in Vietnam.

War is not the easiest way to come of age. I was not a combatant, which spared me the severe stressors so prevalent among many combat vets, but even non-combatants were subjected to mortar and rocket attacks and the uncertainty of when and where explosions would come.

My Post Traumatic Stress was unconscious for a long time, and I eventually realized I had been self-medicating.

It would be a long and winding road from the home I left to the home I found on that Maundy Thursday 40 years ago.

I read somewhere that the longest spiritual journey any of us make is the fifteen inches from our heads to our hearts. I had always lived in my head. That seemed to be what was valued most in our culture – to be logical and able to set aside my feelings to be objective.

My self-medicating (spell that addiction) at once numbed me to the hurts around me and heightened my interior world. This allowed me to close the door on what I knew as a child to be true and turn my back on the love of God as another fallen soul who was not worthy of redemption.

When I was 33 (interesting how things seem to coincide on the journey to faith) I found the Episcopal Church, and discovered the acceptance I had not even realized that I craved. Over the next year I re-integrated into the church and took the first steps on the spiritual journey that would bring my head and heart closer together.

I joined a pilgrimage group in Advent that continued into Lent. In an agreement with the priest who facilitated the group, I went without “self-medication” starting on Palm Sunday. I agreed to see a counselor four days later. His name was George, his diagnosis – “you're an addict”. [Ironic that the source of my addiction is now legal in New Mexico.]

I went home, convinced in my head: “I can do this.”
It didn’t take long before the urge, the thirst, the hunger returned.

But, thanks be to God, instead of satisfying that desire, I turned to the AA Blue Book George had given me.

Soon, all too soon, my own self resolve evaporated in the heat of desire, and I realized I could not do it.

I literally fell on my knees in tears and cried out, “I can’t do this.”

Amidst the wailing and the sobbing – suddenly I felt a warmth surround me – like being enfolded in soft quilts of down.

I don’t know how long the feeling lasted, but when I stood my heart swelled with a love I had never known before. That evening I walked into St. John’s Episcopal Church for the Maundy Thursday service – I was healed. I was home.

As Jesus faces his final hours, knowing what was coming, he does not bewail the manifold sins and wickedness he has seen.
He does not point out the many failings of his disciples to understand his teachings.
He simply shares a dinner with them and ends by taking the place of a servant.

Shortly, we will invite each of you to take the seats at the front of the nave to have your feet washed by your priests.
This ritual portrays the way in which we are to live our lives – giving to others, sharing the burdens of our daily lives, lifting our hearts to care for others if only to share a smile.

We all, each of us, are provided plenty of opportunities to do good.

What’s important is not seeing our names on the list of do-gooders, or how we influence others to act.

What’s important is what we do with those opportunities.

Christ kneels before us tonight washing feet.

Christ asks more of us than just putting our socks and shoes back on.

Christ asks that we look for needs for service in our world, and that we seek to answer those needs.

What you will be asked to do will depend on the opportunities that will test your skills and your willingness to serve.

You don't have to do someone else's tasks that demand skills different from your own. Wash the feet God places before you. That is sufficient.

Consider the needs before you – perhaps a familiar face, perhaps a total stranger – in your workplace, your school, at a community center, or even your home.

There's no shortage of people in this world, or in this town, who are dying by inches for lack of love.

What they need is someone foolish enough to serve them for the love of the crucified Christ.

Wash the feet of the beloved of God that Christ places before you. That will be more than sufficient.

Let us pray.

Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal, after washing their feet, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them.

Write this commandment in our hearts;

give us the will to serve others

as he was the servant of all, who gave his life and died for us,

yet is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.