

Maundy Thursday, 4.9.2020

St. Mark's, Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“Christ, the Sacrament”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Good Evening. Thank you for joining us online for Maundy Thursday worship. Our Music Director and organist Les, along with John on cello, are leading our music this evening. During this anxious and tragic period in our global, national, and local community life, we continue to stream worship live on Facebook from this empty sanctuary. Tomorrow evening we will stream a Good Friday service at 7 pm, and Easter morning, Sunday at 9:30 am. Please join me as we continue to journey to Jesus' cross and resurrection.

Maundy Thursday worship is one of the high points of our liturgical year. Today we celebrate the two commandments that Jesus gave his disciples at his last meal with them: Jesus' commandment to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and his commandment to love one another.

Yet because we cannot gather together in the body in this sanctuary, we are still unable to celebrate Holy Communion, as we would normally do this evening. Though some churches are trying to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion online, tonight I would like to talk about something that we usually experience together: that is, the “real presence” of Christ Jesus in the bread and wine as we receive them. The real presence of Jesus *is real* - as opposed to virtual. The presence of Jesus is visceral. We feel Jesus' presence when we receive him with hands outstretched.

As I think about the difference between real presence and “virtual presence,” I remember the words sung by the great American Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson: “My God Is Real.” The words to that song go like this: *“There are some things I may not know; There are some places, Oh Lord, I cannot go, But I am sure of this one thing: That God is real, for I can feel Him in my soul. Yes, God is real; Oh, He's real in my soul; Yes, God is real; for He has washed and made me whole.”*

God is real means that, through faith, God is already present in us. Christ's real presence in our lives happens not chiefly online, but in the real suffering and joys of our daily life.

Lutheran theology about Holy Communion has always been about the “real presence” of Jesus Christ “in, with, and under” the bread and the wine as it is celebrated in the gathered body of Christ during worship. Bishop Timothy Smith, Bishop of the North Carolina Synod has written about the

difficulty of online sacraments, and his letter is on our website. It is worth reading and thinking about.

Now it probably needs to be said that all of us - your pastor included - are products of a consumer culture. We live in a culture of instant gratification. We get things “on demand,” we “drive through” for food, our lives are focused on something called “convenience.” We have gotten used to getting what we want when we want it. My point is this: we have come to think that we have a right to certain things at any time we want them.

Don’t get me wrong; our technology is a marvelous tool. It allows us to communicate with others around the world; purchase nearly anything with a click; we can see and hear the faces of family and friends on our phones; students can even do research in libraries and archives without ever having to visit them in person.

The internet is a tool, yet the virtual world is also seductive because it seems genuinely real. More than radio or television, we can participate in the online world. And it is here that we can mistake the tool for reality itself. The virtual world does not replace reality. Our devices are tools for certain kinds of online communication, but they do not replace actual in person communication. Someone once said to me, “Home is where you live,” which means that reality is the inescapable “home” that you and I were born into, where we live and where we will die.

Reality is where we live, and where we, at times, also desire to escape from. And it is telling that we spend a lot of time on the internet escaping reality. Reality is a place of real joy and real suffering. Reality is a place of real living and dying. During Holy Week we give thanks that God’s eternal Word became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus suffered a death like ours, was raised, and is truly present now wherever we are.

Reality is better than anything virtual, because by definition virtual is not reality. Recently, many of us have been spending a lot of time working or going to school online. Yet we know that virtual reality doesn’t physically exist; it simply appears real because of our incredible computer technology. Like the Facebook service we are sharing, online gathering is a good substitute for the “real thing” of being together, but it’s also not the same as being together.

At his last meal when Jesus took bread, he was really present among his disciples. He said, “*This is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.*” Christ gave himself as bread and wine in real time, being fully present in body with his disciples gathered around him. Jesus

transformed a Passover meal with his real presence. At the first Passover in Egypt, the real presence of the Lord God passed through the land of Egypt, saving the Israelites and allowing them to begin a journey of salvation out of bondage. This didn't happen online. The real and saving presence of God was absolute for Israel, and the Jewish people have never forgotten God's real presence.

Psalm 116 reads, "*I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.*" In Holy Communion we lift the cup of salvation, call on God's name "*in the presence of all his people.*" Being present together in the body is the way that Jesus comes among us as the sacrament.

At this last supper, Jesus took a cup of wine and gave it a new meaning, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me.*" Just as blood on the doorposts of Israel had saved the Jewish people, Jesus says that his blood was shed as forgiveness for our very real sins. This cup of salvation is the real presence of Jesus in our very midst. We need to be present together as the body of Christ in order to be in the real presence of Christ in his Holy Supper.

Like many of you, I grew up with weekly Eucharist. As a pastor, the celebration of the Eucharist is the central part of my week as Christ becomes truly present among us in the bread and the wine. Many of you have shared with me how hard it is not to be able to gather together for worship and for Holy Communion. It is also very hard for me as your pastor not to be able to gather together.

Writing on the sacraments, Martin Luther commented on 1 Timothy 3:16, writing that *Christ himself is the sacrament*, and that Baptism and Communion are the means by which we receive Christ's sacramental presence among us. The word "sacrament" is a translation of "μυστήριον" (mystery) and points to God's hiddenness revealed to us in Christ. For Luther, the living Word of God, Christ himself, is the sacrament. This is why we can celebrate a Service of the Word online, because we are proclaiming the living Word of God, Christ Jesus, who is always alive in us.

I look forward to the day when we can gather together again – soon I hope - and celebrate the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion together in the body of Christ that is St. Mark's.

We live in extraordinary times, but we remember that the living Word who was crucified and died for our sins, also walks with us in the daily reality of our lives. Like the song, "My God is Real," Christ, the sacrament is already present in us. Christ the Word of God dwells in us, transforming us, so that daily we become the living bread of Christ for others. Amen.