

4.14.2022 Maundy Thursday

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

“Love is always new”

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

Good evening. Everything about today’s celebration of Maundy Thursday centers upon the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ, creating a church fed by his body, to become his living body in loving service to others. On Maundy Thursday, we remember the new thing Jesus is doing in the sacrament of Holy Communion, and in his new commandment to love one another. As we partake of Holy Communion we experience the forgiveness of sins, becoming what we eat – *the living body of Christ in the world*.

Tonight’s reading from 1 Corinthians and the accounts of the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels all witness to Jesus’ institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In the same way, John’s gospel bears witness to Jesus’ establishment of the equally important new commandment “*that you love one another*.” In the sacrament of Holy Communion Jesus shows his love for us by forgiving us our sins and creating his body among us. In the new command to love one another, Jesus reveals the church as his body in loving service for one another and for our neighbors. Maundy Thursday is a holy day because we remember that Jesus is always creating a community of forgiveness and loving service toward others. It is impossible for me to imagine Christianity without Holy Communion or without Jesus’ command to love one another.

Jesus’ words in the first reading of “*this is my body*” and “*this is the new covenant in my blood*,” are the oldest record of the Lord’s Supper in the NT. They are words that reveal the real presence of Jesus in his Holy Supper. The words, “*This is my body*” and “*This is the new covenant in my blood*,” reveal Jesus’ real presence in the bread and the wine. Jesus didn’t say that the bread and the wine are “like me,” or “a symbol of me,” he said, “*This is my body and this is my blood*.”

Notice also that Jesus said, “*for you*” – the sacrament is for you and for your forgiveness. In the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, we receive the mystery of Christ, a mystery transcending our ability to understand, except through faith. In other words, through faith we come to know Christ truly present among us in the bread and the wine. St. Augustine famously wrote, “Unless I believe, I will not understand.” Faith understands Christ as truly present in the bread and the wine.

Maundy Thursday is really about Jesus creating the shape of what will become the Christian church. In 1 Timothy (3:16), Paul speaks of the “pillar and bulwark” – the shape of the household

of God, which is the church. Paul writes, “*Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.*”

In these words of an ancient hymn, Paul speaks of Christ as “*the mystery of our religion.*” The word “sacrament,” or *sacramentum* in Latin, is a translation of the word “mystery” as in Christ is “*the mystery of our religion.*” Very often we use the word “sacrament” as though we are talking about a rational principle or scientific formula rather than the mystery of Christ that is grasped and understood through faith.

Paul is describing the mystery of Christ who “*was revealed in the flesh.*” In Holy Communion the mystery of Christ is revealed in the bread and the wine placed in our hands. Building on 1 Timothy (3:16), of Christ as the mystery (*sacramentum*), Martin Luther, in one of his early sacramental writings, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), wrote that none other than Jesus Christ is the sacrament, and that Holy Communion and Baptism are “sacramental signs” revealing Jesus to us.

When we come forward with our hands outstretched, we hear the words, “*The body of Christ given for you,*” and into our hands, we receive the mystery of Christ’s real presence in the bread and the wine. Jesus’ words, “*This is my body given for you,*” mean his body and blood are his grace given “*for you*” – for each of us. Tonight, once again, we are invited into the mystery of God revealed “*for you*” in the bread and the wine – the grace of the body and blood of Christ.

There are a great many things that we will never understand or that will never exist unless we do them. On Maundy Thursday we see once again that we must receive the bread and the wine to understand the mystery of Christ, and we must love one another in order for God’s love to become real in the world.

Like Augustine’s words, “Unless I believe, I will not understand,” unless we take and eat, unless we love one another, we will never understand the self-giving and self-sacrificing mystery and love of Christ Jesus.

The Christian church is shaped by Jesus’ Holy Supper and by his command to loving service for others. At his last meal with his disciples, Jesus stood up, put a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples feet. He then said, “*For I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you.*” In doing this, Jesus shows us how to love one another by serving one another. Love is not proud or arrogant. Love is humble and always willing to serve others. Jesus said, “*By*

*this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Tonight we remember the simple but profound shape of Christian worship and service: Jesus feeds, forgives and sends his church as servants to be a living sign of God’s love in the world.

Love does not exist in the world without a sign, without our loving actions for others. Just as Jesus chose to reveal himself in the breaking of the bread, he has chosen to reveal himself in our love for one another and our loving service in the world.

On Maundy Thursday, we celebrate a profound mystery: the Christian church is always a new creation in Christ. For two thousand years, Christ has continued to forgive, create and love all who stretch out their hands to him and to their neighbor in loving service.

Today we give thanks for Jesus’ words of grace, “*for you*” and we give thanks for his example and command to have love “*for one another.*”

God’s love is always new. May our hands, blessed in receiving the holy mystery of Christ’s body and blood, be ever blessed as living signs of Christ’s love made real in this world for others. Amen.