

On This Special Night

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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As you know, this special night in Holy Week is known as Maundy Thursday. The focus of this service corresponds to the Thursday night when Jesus and his disciples shared a Passover meal together in that upper room in Jerusalem.

As you might expect, each of the four gospel writers presents a different version of what occurred in that upper room on the last evening of Jesus' life. But by using a mixture of these gospel accounts, the Christian church has historically focused on three major events.

The first is Jesus' humble act of washing the feet of his disciples. This particular event is only recorded in the gospel of John, however.

The second is Jesus' institution of what we call "The Lord's Supper." Interestingly, this event is *not* found in John's account.

The third, which is also found only in John, is the new commandment that Jesus gave his disciples: to love one another as he has loved them. It is from this third event that church coined the name for this service, Maundy Thursday.

I just have to ask you, have any of you ever thought at one time or another that the name of this service was "Monday Thursday?" I did for years. But the word isn't Monday, is "**maundy.**" **This word comes from the Latin *mandatum* from which we get the word *mandate*, or *command*. So in English, this is "Commandment Thursday."** And historically, the church believes that on this special night we should make special note of this imperative to love one another.

Jesus used the occasion of the last supper to dramatize his love for his disciples by washing their feet. Some churches incorporate a ritual foot washing into their worship service, seeing it as something that Jesus commanded his disciples to do literally. While that may be the case, I think we should take this action metaphorically. In other words, **we should submit ourselves to the humble service of others – figuratively washing one another's feet.**

A powerful hallmark of Christianity is indeed service to others. **Our call to love is indeed a call to serve.** For as Jesus told his disciples at another occasion, "I came not to be served, but to serve."

It's interesting that Jesus' new commandment to love one another also came during supper, where bread was broken and wine was poured out. The Christian church has historically interpreted this event as the Institution (the

initiation) of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, also known as Communion, and the Eucharist.

The context of this supper was the traditional ritual of the Passover Meal – known as the Seder. But this meal was, and is, much more than a simple ritual. By sharing this particular meal together, they called the past into the present.

In essence, they *became* the people of the Exodus – an event that occurred centuries and centuries before. By eating, drinking, and *remembering*, they understood themselves to be the people of God. It was, in fact, an important element in *becoming* the people of God. It was an act of reformation.

In order to re-form his disciples into a new community, blessed by both an old and a new covenant, Jesus did something startling. He changed the ritual and broke from tradition. During that particular Seder meal he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **What a strange thing to say.** What did Jesus mean by this?

Then he took a cup of wine, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. Then he told them something they also most likely didn't understand at the time, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Now, some would argue that this Institution of the Lord's Supper occurred in exactly this way – a literal, historical description. Others would argue that the gospel writers simply wrote it down this way in their accounts to help explain a new and very important ritual that the ancient Christian church had begun practicing.

Either way, **there is power in this ritual. For it helps define us as the people of God who go by the tribal name, Christians.**

What is sadly ironic, however, is that the differences in the understanding of this event has led to so much division among Christians. Ever since the words were recorded "Take, eat, this is my body," we have been arguing about what the meaning of it is.

In what sense is the bread the body of Christ? Figuratively? Symbolically? Literally? Biochemically? Blood has been shed over this question. Calvin split from Luther over this issue. This is a scandal to the church. Is this how we show our love for one another?

An event that was meant to draw us nearer to God and one another has instead turned into an act of exclusion for many. But our fundamental understanding of this sacrament of grace is that no one should be excluded from the Table. You are not excluded. You are included – all of us. **Jesus did not exclude, either shall we.**

When Jesus told his disciples to love each other, he did not mean that we should love only the people who agree with our understanding of things. He meant that we should love each other. Period. And he washed all their feet, and he gave them all the bread and the cup.

So let us remember this tonight on Maundy Thursday. Let us remember it always. And let us remember (and I love this phrase) who we are and whose we are – and that we are all loved and included in God grace.

May we grow closer to God and to one another as we break bread together on this special night.

Amen.