

Final Instructions

John 13:1-17, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2012

Tonight we gather to continue our journey toward the sorrow of Good Friday and the joy of Easter. But we're not here just to get some preliminary matters out of the way. Maundy Thursday is more than a warm-up act for what follows tomorrow and Sunday.

In fact, our worship tonight is essential to how we know and understand our Lord and Savior. We hear about what Jesus did and said on the last full day of his life. In many ways our readings are equivalent to Jesus' Last Will and Testament. They are his final instructions given in his final hours of freedom.

That's why today is called Maundy Thursday. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum," whose English rendering is "mandate." Maundy thus signifies an instruction, a command, a directive.

And two things Jesus did at the Last Supper so long ago certainly fit that category. First, he washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us, in the ways of servanthood and humility. He demonstrated that his love knows no limits.

Second, he explained that the bread and wine of his final meal were to be his body and blood given for us in a New Covenant with God. And he commanded his disciples, and all people for all time, to continually come together and share in his sacrifice in remembrance of him.

We will carry out both of Jesus' instructions later in this service. But first, I would like to speak briefly about our foot washing service, and then reflect in greater detail upon the meaning of our sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

II.

In first century Palestine people often had dirty feet. They wore sandals and walked on dusty or muddy roads. When they arrived at their destinations it was traditional, and probably necessary, for them to wash their feet as they went inside. Even today we hear warnings about not tracking dirt into the house.

Socially, however, foot washing was a menial task that never would be done by the host of a gathering, or the owner of the house, or anyone in a position of authority. People either washed their own feet, or it was done by servants.

But yet, Jesus, the Son of God, washed the disciples feet to show them the meaning of humility. And it demonstrated what he said earlier in his ministry about how the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and those who wish to be great must first be servants.

As a result, this story is not really about dirty feet. The disciples most likely had washed their own feet earlier when they came in the room. This footwashing by Jesus is one of those classic cases where actions speak louder than words.

And Jesus' actions turned tradition upside down. He showed that the world's values were not always God's values. He made it clear that the pride and vanity of worldly things eventually must give way to the humility and selflessness of godly things.

In that simple act of washing the disciples' feet Jesus exemplified two principles of Christian life. First, just as he served his friends, we also are called to serve others. Second, as is evident from his dialogue with Peter, who resisted at first, it is important that we receive and be grateful for those same offerings of kindness when others extend them to us.

After I finish this homily we will have a foot washing service right here where some people will participate as representatives of the congregation. And I understand that others might wish to be observers, and that's fine. Anyone, however, who wants to come forward is welcome to do so.

III.

Then, shortly after we minister to our feet, we will minister to our hearts and our souls. We will celebrate the Eucharist in obedience to our Lord's command, and in thanksgiving for his sacrifice.

And this brings us to our reading from First Corinthians. The words were familiar weren't they? This is my body, which is given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me. We say them every time we come to the communion rail. But what was behind these words?

We probably know that fateful night was the Jewish Passover. Jesus and his disciples were celebrating God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt. For centuries Jews had done so with a Passover meal on that special night, and do so still.

And we also know that after delivering his people, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai that if they were obedient to him they would be blessed, and would be the light to bring the rest of the world to faith in God. Today this is called the Old Covenant.

History shows, however, that the Hebrew people did not honor that covenant. Those events are another sermon. But God acted again. He was faithful to humanity. Jesus Christ came to restore our relationship with God in the New Covenant that Jesus revealed to his disciples.

And that New Covenant turned out to be God's promise to all people for all time that if we are truly penitent and accept Jesus as our Savior and believe that he died for us, then through that faith we will be forgiven our sins and have eternal life in God's presence.

So the Hebrew Passover celebration of the Old Covenant made room for the New Covenant of our faith. That does not mean the New Covenant supersedes the old. It does not. The Hebrew people still are among God's chosen.

But it does mean that the new completes the old, and the biblical nation of Israel created when Moses and Joshua led the people into the promised land now is called to be a light unto the world through the church Jesus Christ established and left behind.

IV.

This can lead us to ask two questions about our Lord's sanctification of bread and wine so long ago on that Passover night. First, how do we understand the significance of the bread and the wine? Second, what does the Eucharist mean in our lives today?

As we begin with the bread and wine, it's important to remember that Jesus said this is my body, this is my blood. He did not say that it merely symbolized his body or blood. His intent was more than mere imagery.

On the other hand he also did not mean that the bread and wine were in fact his body and blood. Jesus obviously was still alive. He had not yet been arrested. His blood had not yet been shed. His body still was untouched.

And so his words looked to the future. They linked his body and blood to the New Covenant to be established by his death and resurrection. It would be fair to conclude that while Jesus was not speaking symbolically, he also was not speaking in an absolute literal sense either.

Different churches understand Christ's meaning at this Last Supper in different ways. In the Episcopal Church, and in the Anglican Church worldwide, we generally accept the doctrine of the "Real Presence."

This means that Jesus Christ really and actually is present in the bread and wine as it is given in communion. But we do not go so far as to say that the bread and wine actually have been transformed into Christ's body and blood in some way. We just don't know about that.

However, as the bread and wine are consecrated something happens. Jesus Christ miraculously is present at the Holy Table. When you receive the bread and wine you receive our Lord and Savior. It's a spiritual thing, and we cannot explain it. He truly is among us. But it is a mystery and will remain so this side of eternity.

The second question, the meaning of the Eucharist in our lives, is not so mysterious. We know that at baptism we are freed from the guilt of original sin even though its consequences remain.

And we also know that notwithstanding the grace of baptism we continue to disregard God's will for us. But that does not mean that something went wrong at our baptisms, or that something did not take.

Rather it confirms that we are not perfect, and we still do things that separate us from God. That's one of the reasons why we have the Eucharist. We confess our sins during the service and are cleansed. It is not just a ritual or meaningless gestures.

Christ's body and blood were given for us. Think about that. Given for us, to offer forgiveness for our inevitable sins. And if we sincerely seek forgiveness then it is granted. Regular participation in the Eucharist restores us, and prepares us again to walk in the light of Christ.

V.

So, this night overflows with meaning. We sense the spiritual significance of Jesus' washing the disciples feet. And we share the spiritual reality of his presence in the Eucharist.

As we continue through this Holy Week, we will experience the sorrow, sadness, and introspection of Good Friday. And then comes the joy and celebration of Easter. But tonight, Maundy Thursday, is a night of humility, service, and sharing in our Lord's presence. It truly leads to the meaning of Good Friday and the hope of Easter. *Amen.*