

## Maundy Thursday Sermon

Grace mercy and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We have entered Holy Week, and begin tonight our observance of the Holy Three days. These days in this holiest of weeks have from very early in the church's history been conceived as a whole. A whole service of observance, starting tonight and lasting into Saturday evening. A whole service made up of three parts, tonight, tomorrow night, and Saturday night. Easter morning was the full celebration of the victory of Easter, the capstone to the three-day observance. And so our service tonight does not end with a benediction, but ends with meditation and an organ postlude. The service continues Friday night and again, ends in silence, to be continued at the Easter vigil with fanfare and celebration at the coming dawn of Easter morning. The three days were conceived to honor Christ's passion as one whole unit. Three worship moments, broken up and strung together in one long service.

I would like us to think about the passion of Christ as having four movements. Tonight's service remembers Christ's command to love each other as he has loved us. In it, Christ lays out the framework for interpreting his ordeal. Then on Friday, his ordeal begins. On Saturday, his ordeal comes to its fruition in his experience of death, and it ends as we celebrate the arrival of Easter. These four movements break up the passion into manageable parts, and hopefully create a way for us to learn more deeply from these events what the will of God is for the world. At the heart of these events is the message we are to take from them for our understanding of who God is for us. What is key is not just what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, but what his doing so says about who God is. God's saving acts are always an experience of new life out of death, but all of God's acts of salvation in the world also point to the nature of the God we will worship in perpetuity. God saves. That's who God is. If you know that God saves, you know who God is.

The scene is set tonight with the supper that Jesus arranges to eat with his disciples. Earlier in the story, he has already announced to his disciples that he will be arrested in Jerusalem, tried and executed, and then will rise on the third day. Together, these unique experiences of betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection amount to what I will call Jesus' ordeal. I do not mean to cheapen

them with a word we use to refer to frustrating or irritating experiences of unusual but not necessarily life-threatening hardship. Jesus' ordeal consists of utter and undeserved betrayal and abandonment, passing through torture and execution, and then ending in miraculous resurrection. The church's word for this ordeal is Christ's Passion. It is clear from the disciples' reactions that some of them do not really believe these events could happen to Jesus. Only Thomas accepts Jesus as his word, but then in a fit of bluster, totally overestimates his ability to actually follow Jesus and share fully in this ordeal.

Tonight, Jesus uses the Passover meal with his disciples to signal that these events are about to take place. The truth is that these events are horrible to experience, and they will shock, confuse and shatter the disciples. However, in view of the trauma of this experience of loss, Jesus provides them with a way to interpret his ordeal. He uses the Jewish Passover meal to frame his ordeal. The significance of the Passover meal in the history of Israel is recounted in our first lesson tonight, where God reminds Moses and Aaron to have the people practice a special meal as a perpetual reminder of the salvation God provided for them in rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, and moving them from death into life. Now, Jesus shares his meal with his disciples on the eve of his own Passover from death to life and commands them to use the meal to remember what he has done. Like the original Passover meal, this new meal becomes the means to remember what he has done for them, as Paul testifies in his letter to the Corinthians; For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Later, after the resurrection, we know from the Gospel of Luke that the disciples are able to recognize the risen Jesus in their midst through the breaking of the bread, that is, in the meal that he instituted.

The meal then connects the people of God to God's saving acts at the beginning of the ordeal and helps them recognize the salvation of God on the other side of the ordeal. If we imagine the ordeal as a river, the meal serves to connect the two shores or banks of the river. It may be useful to imagine how a cable ferry is able to crossover from one river bank to the other by moving over the water along the length of the cable that is strung between both shores. Once the disciples arrive on the other side of Easter resurrection, they are then able to access the memory of Jesus' saving work for them because of the meal that he instituted before the ordeal began. It is in this sense that we can understand Jesus' question to them, in the passage from John's gospel after washing their feet. Jesus asks the

disciples, “do you know what I have done for you?” The foot washing is John’s way of interpreting Christ’s passion. Christ has served us by setting aside his majesty and bending down to the depths of human status, dignity and experience, and performing the work of a servant. The foot-washing stands for his service to us in love by handing over his own body, by allowing himself to be handed over to a death he didn’t deserve, so that his people might themselves one day come through death with eternal life that they don’t deserve.

Therefore, because of what Christ has done for us, we can obey his command to love one another and our neighbor, just as he has loved us. We too can love, we too can sacrifice, we too can risk misunderstanding, betrayal and judgement in order to love as Jesus loved us. We too can risk death for the sake of compassion, as many are being called on to do in our current situation. We can do this because Christ has given himself to us, for us, and in return for this great gift, we can love him and serve him by doing the same for our neighbor. This also means that, in the midst of the experience of any loss, we can hold fast to that cable across the river, the meal that connects us to Christ’s saving power, and we hope and pray that it will hold us until we arrive at death’s opposite shore, in the realm of Christ’s everlasting kingdom.

What is more, on this particular Maundy Thursday, as the world struggles with the coronavirus pandemic, and as people the world over struggle with economic upheaval and loss, with political chaos, with illness, and with the death of loved ones, the meal that memorializes God’s saving work in Christ’s death and resurrection holds us in his care, shapes us in his memory, and feeds us along the path of faith. In this most unprecedented of situations for the celebration of Maundy Thursday, we are not able to celebrate the very meal we honor tonight. It is true, we are bound together by the power of the holy Spirit, and this bond holds us fast in the presence of Christ virtually as well as it does in person. Given this belief, some churches are practicing virtual communion. Yet the promise of Christ’s physical presence with us in the meal is most powerfully evoked when we are physically present to one another as the body of Christ. And so the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, of which we are but one congregation, has asked that its member churches fast from the celebration of Holy Communion until we can gather again in physical community on the other side of this pandemic. It is not that Christ’s presence can’t handle the separation of distance, but for the

sake of good order and honoring the basic meaning of the meal, we fast until further notice.

I know this is painful, and I have heard the pain testified to in the comments posted on our live-stream Facebook services over the last few weeks, and in my discussions with members. We miss each other deeply. We miss being in our gathered worship assembly. And I think in all of this longing, it is really the experience of being the body of Christ together that we miss the most. So we long for each other, we long for Christ, and we long for the end of this traumatic and terrifying ordeal that we must go through. But we know that no ordeal that we or anybody else might experience falls outside of the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his ordeal for our sakes, gathered the legacy of the covenant with his people, God's promise of salvation as a blessing for the peoples of the world, and joined us all to that covenant in his resurrection from death into life. May this life feed us now in the promise of Christ's eternal life, through the power of the holy spirit. Amen.