

Maundy Thursday, Yr. C

March 24, 2016

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; 1 Cor.11: 23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Tonight is all about sacraments. Many of you undoubtedly remember the catechism definition, that a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace. St. Augustine says, more simply, that a sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing. In our Exodus reading this evening, it's pretty easy to see the sacramental nature of the Hebrews' actions and of God's saving grace. You can see why the early church connected this reading to the idea of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the one whose blood would be spread, not on the doorposts, but on the wood of the cross and thereby, the one who saves God's people.

Anglicans have held, with the Protestant side of our history, that there are two sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist – that those are the “two great sacraments.” But, with the Catholic side of our history, we also acknowledge the sacramental rites that have “evolved in the church” – confirmation, ordination, matrimony, reconciliation and unction. So we all, although by slightly different routes, end up with seven.

But if we live in a sacramental universe, in which everything points to God and everything is, therefore, a potential means of grace, then there are a lot more than seven. I remember hearing a story of a Native American asking a missionary about the number of sacraments and he couldn't believe that there were only seven. “I would have thought,” he said, “that you would have many, many more than that.” And we do, although the church carefully says that we're ASSURED of grace in only those named. But that doesn't mean that many more things and events and people can become those signs of the sacred that Augustine talks about.

Tonight the sacrament that's front and center is the Eucharist, as we heard in Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which he tells the story of institution of the Eucharist at the last supper. We hear those words Sunday after Sunday: This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And, this is my blood, which is shed (or poured out) for you and for all; do this in remembrance of me. Most often, I think, we focus on the “remembrance” part of those sentences – we're to remember Christ in our repetition of this action, and, by so doing, to make him present once more. But I think a case can be made for focusing on a different set of words, the “do this” words. If you remember your grammar, you'll recognize that these sentences are in the imperative voice, i.e., This is my body, given for you, YOU DO THIS in remembrance. And This is my blood, poured out...YOU DO THIS. Looked at this way, Jesus is saying, I've given my life in obedience to the Father; I've poured it all out, in loving service. Now you – you go and do the same thing.

That connection is made clearer when we consider the Gospel. As you know, this is John's portrayal of the Last Supper. Rather than the institution of the Eucharist, John tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. He's washing the feet of those who were, not too long ago, arguing about which one of them was the greatest. For one of them to bend down and wash the feet of one of his competitor disciples would have meant he was the loser in that argument. Jesus is washing the feet of those who suffer from weakness, from the inability to understand, from self-seeking – to say nothing of hypocrisy and betrayal. And yet, he does it.

When he's finished, he asks the question: Do you know what I've done? I've given you an example – an example of what love and service look like. And then he says those words which give this night its name,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The word "commandment" comes from the Latin "mandatum" from which we get "Maundy." There's a story about a mom telling her young daughter that it was Maundy Thursday and the little one kept repeating, "I get it; Monday Thursday!"

So, again that question: do you know what I have done? In response, we can note that

- Jesus has totally changed the game. Life is not about dominance, but about service. It's not about prestige and acquisition; it's about giving yourself away. It's not about trying to save your life, but rather, about losing it in a great adventure of love and generosity. In his book, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, Steven Pinker talks not only about those angels, but also about the inner demons which we have to overcome – and the quest for dominance, whether personal or tribal, or national is, he says, historically the deadliest form of human conflict. Jesus is asking us to move away from those narrow attitudes of superiority and contempt that end in inequality and violence and instead adopt attitudes that will move us to compassion and peace.
- Jesus has also issued an open-ended commandment. Love one another, he says. Not LIKE one another, or feel good about one another, but LOVE – not to FEEL but to ACT in a way that works for the good of the other. It would be easier, I think, to try to just follow a bunch of rules!

But no, he's asking us to act. Each year at this Eucharist, we do a blessing of hands for ministry. One could argue that our hands are what we often use, both to the detriment and to the good of others. I'd like to expand this ritual a bit this year, to include a washing of our hands, first, before we bless them. I did this because I recently read something written by Lucy Nanson, of New Zealand. She says:

Wash my hands on Maundy Thursday, not my feet.

My hands peel potatoes, wipe messes from the floor, change dirty nappies, clean the grease from pots and pans;

Have pointed in anger and pushed away in tears

In years past they've smacked a child and raised a fist, fumbled with nervousness, shaken with fear

I've wrung them when waiting for news to come, crushed a letter I'd rather forget, covered my mouth when I've been caught out, touched forbidden things, childhood memories do not grow dim.

These hands have dug gardens, planted seed, picked fruit and berries, weeded out and pruned trees; found bleeding from the roses' thorns, dirt and blood mix together when washed before a cup of tea.

Love expressed by them, asks for your respect in the hand-shake of warm greeting, the gentle rubbing of a child's bump, the caressing of a lover, the softness of a baby's cheek,

sounds of music played by them in tunes upon a flute.

They've held a frightened teenager, touched a father in his death, where cold skin tells the end of life has come, but not the end of love, comforted a mother losing agility and health.

With my hands outstretched before you

I stand humbled and in awe

your gentle washing in water, the softness of the towel

symbolizing a cleansing,

the servant-hood of Christ.

Wash my hands on Maundy Thursday and not my feet.

Amen.

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