

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer

Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY

4/5/2007, Maundy Thursday

1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

This is the night in which our Lord was betrayed. It happened long ago – nearly two thousand years ago now – but it happened during a particular night, and Maundy Thursday remembers that night.

When I was boy on the farm, Good Friday, which we celebrate tomorrow, meant a lot to me -- not the liturgy, for we had no tradition of Good Friday services in my little church, but simply the story of what happened to Jesus on that day. Those were quieter times back then. I had space and time and leisure to think about the sacred story. I would gaze at the fields, gaze at the river, gaze at the sky and try to imagine that three-hour stretch, from noon till three, when our Lord was dying on the cross. *This* earth experienced those things – this same earth that you and I know: it experienced the death of God on that first Good Friday.

And so it is with this evening liturgy now stretching before us: In this liturgy, we remember the commencing of our Lord's passion. At the end of this evening's liturgy, we will strip the altar and our chancel bare – a symbol of the progressive loss of our Lord's freedom, dignity, and chances in this world. The hours stretching ahead of Jesus will be long, trying, and exhausting. He will be arrested, interrogated, mocked, spat upon, dragged from place to place. From your college days or even from long nights nowadays, you might remember the deep fatigue that comes upon the mind in the wee hours. Under the best of conditions, it wears you out to be kept awake through the night. But that is what Jesus faces on this night, the night in which he was betrayed.

Yet, oh! how peacefully and graciously Jesus begins this night. We hear that phrase about his betrayal in every Eucharist, but perhaps we have

missed how strange it is – how filled with the wonder of love: "In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread..." What? He takes bread and gives thanks? Why does he not flee? If this is the night of his betrayal, and if he *knows* it to be such a night, as he does, why does he linger? Why does he institute the Holy Communion? Why wash the feet of his disciples? He seems preoccupied with love, when it would have been reasonable for him to be preoccupied with escape. But Jesus, in the night in which he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of the Holy Communion and washed the feet of his friends, even his betrayer! These things he had time for.

The church is persuaded that there is no understanding Holy Week unless we understand this: Extraordinary love is afoot in Jesus. Love is the lens through which we must see the events of these three holy days stretching before us. What happened to Jesus was the outpouring of his love for the world and his invitation to you and to me to adopt that kind of love and make it our own. Tomorrow's death on the Cross is the death of the Man of love, who bids us to be men and women, boys and girls of love too. Maundy Thursday asks us to look at Good Friday through the lens of love. As medical technology can scan a human body and focus on bones or ligaments or whatever it chooses and disregard the rest, so Maundy Thursday asks us to look at our Lord's death on the cross as Love Unfailing and as an invitation to you and me to join such love. Do not be distracted by the cruelty of the soldiers and of the crowds. If need be, disregard the shallowness of Herod and the cowardice of Pilate. The thing to see in the Passion of Our Lord is Love pressing onward, one exhausted step after another, never giving up, never failing.

Those crazy Corinthians got that wrong. I am referring to the context for this evening's Bible reading from First Corinthians Chapter Eleven. In that reading, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians of Christ's institution of the Holy Communion. He reminds them that this holy meal is *Christ's* meal. It is the *Lord's* Supper. And therefore it can never be the occasion for conflict or discrimination within the congregation.

If ever there was a congregation of Christians who were like sheep without a shepherd – who almost inevitably got things wrong and strayed off from the faith – it was the early Corinthians. I pity them. They were not raised in the faith of the Israel. They did not know the Bible, they did not know of the proposed sacrifice of Isaac, of the Exodus, of the Suffering Servant. For all their sophistication in Greek philosophy, they were children in the faith of the Church.

And so it was, that the Corinthians developed a strange, impious community meal that somehow merged with or overran the Holy Communion. St. Paul has to challenge them:

²⁰When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. ²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread...(1 Cor. 11:20-23)

You can almost hear St. Paul's alarm and frustration in this passage. Those crazy Corinthians were celebrating the Holy Communion with little sense of the love to which that meal bids them, precisely because it the Lord's Supper, and our Lord is the Man of Love.

Above all, we see this love at work in this evening's story of our Lord's washing of the feet of his disciples and his giving to them a new commandment – the commandment that they are to love one another as he has loved them. It was lowly work, this washing of the feet. Ancient people were a walking people – walking with sandals. They had no

public transportation, no cars, no bicycles. They walked on the dusty roads. Their feet became dirty, and it was the work of the lowliest servant to wash the feet of others. This lowliness, Jesus did. It was a humble way to make life better and more pleasant for others – to wash their feet – but this humble service Jesus did. In the night in which he was betrayed, when he knew he was to be betrayed, he had time for this: to linger with his disciples and to wash their feet.

After Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, he speaks of a “new commandment”:

“Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you...³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

If we should wonder about the *newness* of this commandment, about in what it consists, I think the answer is this: The command to love one another is not new. It goes back to ancient Israel who from of old has known that the Lord bids his people to love one another, to love the stranger, to love the resident alien. So, I think it not so much the content of the commandment that is new, but rather its possibility of fulfillment. What is new is not the command to love, but the plausibility of obeying the command. For now, the One who commands us to love is setting out of that path himself, and though it should cost him death on the Cross, his resurrection means that there is Someone to walk with us in this path of love and to hold our lives precious as we walk it – even Jesus Christ himself, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.