

Maundy Thursday B – April 9, 2009
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-17,
31b-35

Maundy Thursday. “Maundy,” from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning “command” or “mandate.”

What is it we celebrate here tonight? What is it we are commanded to do? These two things – celebration and commandment – are not necessarily the same thing, as we will soon learn.

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As we heard from our Gospel reading of John, Jesus knew that his time had come. It would not have required divine knowledge for him to know that the time of his death was near. He had made enemies all around.

Jesus had made enemies of the Romans during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He had made a mockery of their victory parades by riding into town on a donkey and being lauded as a king by the Jews in Jerusalem.

Jesus had made enemies of the temple leadership. On his second day in Jerusalem he entered the temple. Seeing the great bastion of commerce the temple had become, in a fit of righteous indignation he drove out those who were buying and selling in the temple. He upset the long-held traditions of right practice in the temple.

Surely Jesus realized that his days were numbered.

And so he gathered together with his disciples for a final meal. In the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – they are gathered for the Passover. The Passover... when all Jews gather to remember God delivering them from slavery in Egypt. They remember how, when God's wrought the final plague against the Egyptians – the death of the firstborn of each house – they were saved by the sign of the blood of a lamb splashed on the doorposts of their houses.

In the Gospel of John, however, Jesus gathered together with his disciples on the eve of the Passover. As they prepared to share their last meal together, Jesus arose from the table and set about doing the work of a slave: Washing the feet of his disciples.

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These two actions – the sharing of a meal, and the washing of feet – the things we gather together tonight to celebrate and recognize as commandment.

In his last supper with the disciples, Jesus instituted what we now call Holy Communion. During the Passover meal, he took a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, blessing them and sharing them with his gathered disciples. He explained to them that just as the blood of the first Passover lambs was shed to save God's people from death, so also would his own body be broken, his blood shed.

It seems odd to refer to such a tragic event as the death of God's own Son as a celebration. And yet, here in the midst of our Holy Week, this is precisely what we do.

We gather first of all in thanksgiving for all of God's benefits to us, most especially the giving of His own Son.

We gather to remember what Christ has done for us, not only in somber adoration but also in anticipation of the future day when we will all share the paschal feast in God's heavenly kingdom.

We gather to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit among us, by whose actions we are gathered into one holy communion with God through the eating and drinking of the meal.

The meal is cause for celebration, as we remember and recognize God's presence among us in the bread and wine, God's presence which has the power not only to redeem us from sin and death, but to renew us to live as Christ's body in this world.

But all of this is celebration, not command. The Lord's Supper is pure gift from God; one cannot be *commanded* to receive this gift. We can only graciously accept it, and celebrate that God loves us so much that such a costly gift is given to us.

So what is the command of God on this Maundy Thursday? We find the answer in John's Gospel account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples. After he had washed their feet he said,

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.¹

And later he said,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.²

This is the command: To love one another as Jesus has loved us. The model for that love is Jesus himself, who humbly emptied himself and assumed the role of a slave in service to those he loves, being obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.³

Amen.

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¹ John 13:12b-17

² John 13:34-35

³ Philippians 2:7-8