

In remembrance

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116: 1, 10-17;

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

Maundy Thursday, April 6, 2023; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

The Rev. Dina Carter Ishler, Deacon in Charge

In the Name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, Amen.

Tonight, as we enter these three holiest of days in our church year, walking with Jesus through his Passion and Death and towards Resurrection, our readings are all about remembering. Every year on this day we call Maundy Thursday we hear the same readings regardless of what lectionary year we are in, each with its own unique story that pulls us into a deeper place of remembering. Our Exodus reading tells of the institution of the Passover feast, a detailed description of God's instructions to protect God's people from the horrific loss of every firstborn in the land of Egypt. This is a story of God's providence in the midst of darkness and heartbreak all around, a story so powerful that the Israelites are commanded to tell it again and again every year to a new

generation, gathering for a festival centered completely around remembrance. The old story comes alive each time God's promise of protection is heard, the people proclaiming in song and dance and ritual and with feasting how God has acted on behalf of their ancestors and continues to act in ways that bring liberation from bondage to the faithful.

The psalmist's response is to offer up the sheer joy and gratitude we feel when we know we have been saved from danger, profound relief and love expressed as soul-deep thanksgiving. We hear of gratitude for the remembrance of God's faithfulness and providence: "I love the LORD, because he has heard the voice of my supplication, because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I called upon him. How shall I repay the LORD for all the good things he has done for me?"

Simply and lovingly, Paul presents us with the story of Jesus' Last Supper with his friends in words now intimately familiar from our eucharistic prayers: *This is my body*, Jesus says with the bread in his hands, *that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me*. Cradling the cup, Jesus tells his table companions, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me*. The acts of eating, of drinking, of invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit upon these gifts so that they might really “be to us the Body and Blood of Christ”, as we do at every Eucharistic celebration, do not stand alone as the means of nourishing us- they do so rooted in the command to remember all that Jesus was and is and will always be to us.

And then, our reading from John's Gospel spotlights Jesus' servant ministry of touch and love as he washes the feet of his friends and shows them what love looks like: “Love one another as I have loved you.” This vision of

discipleship is summed up in this new commandment: when love is freely and humbly shared with others, it is the very same love that will bring God's kingdom to the ends of the earth. "If you know these things", says Jesus, "You are blessed if you do them." Remembrance of this act and the love that prompted it is the very foundation of God's new covenantal relationship with God's people: "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."

The command "to remember" is woven into the fabric of Holy Scripture to describe an experience much more complex and multi-sensory than how we usually understand 'remembering' - it is not just thinking of something that has already happened or something we need to do (like pick up milk at the store.) Rather, remembering touches every part of our being- our minds,

our souls, and our bodies- with such fullness of meaning that the past transforms us here and now, in our living present. God's promises to God's people as revealed in ancient texts and people from long ago are made alive and real through the act of remembering- in our liturgy, we gather up the pieces of the stories we hear and of our individual experiences and together we offer them to God, knowing God is already fully present and longing to welcome us home.

When I was a child, there was a book series in the 'young readers' section of our small-town library titled "We were there", describing such historical events as "We were there at the Boston Tea Party" in such detail that you felt as if you really were there, part of the story as it unfolded around you. I often think, when engaging with the living Word, that sharing in a kind of "We were there" experience helps the events, the people, the remembering come alive for us in really powerful ways.

The gift, of course, of doing this with tonight's readings is that we are sharing in the very same acts that we hear about in these stories. We can imagine how it really felt for the disciples to have their tired, dusty feet lovingly washed by Jesus as our own feet (or hands) are washed. We can imagine what it was like to be at that table with our friends and receiving the bread into our hands and wine from the goblet held to our lips because we too are being fed. We will hear all that has been said and done on this night and the call to "do this in remembrance of me" as said directly to us- we have been called to remember how to care for one another after the model of Jesus with radical generosity, tenderness and humility, a love beyond understanding that will never end.

I know we all have those favorite hymns that touch us in the very deepest part of our souls, the text and the music combining to help us remember stories about ourselves and people we have loved, memories shining as

clear as sunlight. For me, one of these hymns is 306 in our own hymnal (you can open to it if you'd like to look at it.)

The text of this hymn clearly reminds us that all boundaries of time and space have been broken when it comes to sharing in the Sacrament of Bread and Wine, “one body with all the saints on earth and saints at rest.”

But it is the second verse that tells the story of what we do tonight and every time we gather to break bread together in language as if we really were there:

We meet, as in that upper room they met;
 thou at the table, blessing, yet dost stand:
 “This is my Body”, so thou givest yet”:
 faith still receives the cup as from thy hand.”

faith still receives the cup as from thy hand.

Imagine with me, beloveds, not just tonight but always-what it would be like for our remembering to have that clarity- to be able to touch *each and every time* Jesus' hand extended to us in love and humility and

longing. *Imagine how remembering this kind of love that can only be of God- love poured out for us, washing over us, feeding us, love both broken and lifted high to draw us to God's self- will make us God's people in this and every age.* Please, says Jesus, before I leave you- *remember that I have shown you what Love looks like.*
Amen.