

April 9, 2009

Maundy Thursday, Year B (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

Maundy Thursday is the day when we celebrate the commandment Jesus made for us to observe the Eucharist. There is a strong sense of Eucharistic theology in the liturgy tonight. Of course, as our guest preacher, David Bartlett, pointed out this afternoon, there is no mention of this particular command in the Gospel reading assigned to us this year. However, we do have the command in the Epistle. The Apostle Paul recorded the words of institution in his first letter to the Corinthians, the earliest written account we have of what happened on the night our Savior was handed over to suffering and death.

Not so in the Gospel... We have no words of institution at all, no Eucharistic Prayer or action. Instead, we have a scene from the last supper, in which Jesus, as an act of loving and humble service, washes the feet of his disciples, before giving the command to do likewise. He reinforces this command by saying to his disciples to love one another as he loved them. Jesus is not talking about love as an emotion, but rather love as action. In other words, don't just say you love someone, show that person your love through service.

How can we sustain this life of service? How can we get past our own baggage, our own difficulties and continue a life of love through serving others? Perhaps this is why Jesus wanted us to celebrate the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is rooted in the Last Supper, which we have come to understand as a Passover meal. The Passover is a remembrance of the Exodus story. The Jews celebrate Passover as a way to remember their past. God is thanked, not only for the meal, but for all God's benefits to God's people, especially the deliverance of the Jews out of Egypt. Recalling this past allows those in the present to participate in that story. The story of their ancestors becomes their own story and there is a sense of unity and fellowship with each other in the present as well as with their ancestors. This remembrance meal, though a command of God's, was a gift really, so that the people of God would stay connected to God. And tonight we have Jesus breaking the bread and pouring the wine making the commands, "'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Like the Passover meal, this is more than a simple recollection; we become part of the story, and we become untied with each other and our ancestors. Like Passover, we have a command

which keeps us connected to God; we stay connected to God through Christ in the Eucharist.

There has been much made of the Eucharist and Eucharistic theology throughout the history of Christendom. Some believe the doctrine of transubstantiation, which is a fancy word that scares some people. Essentially this doctrine says that the bread and wine, although they look like bread and wine, really become the body and blood through a mystical process in the Eucharistic Prayer, and when we have communion we are eating the real body and drinking the real blood of Christ.

The opposite of this theory, is that the Eucharist is only a memorial meal. There is nothing more there than bread and wine; it is no more mystical than a covered dish meal. The meaning is no deeper than a civil war reenactment. The bread and wine are mere symbols, nothing more. There are other doctrines such as consubstantiation, transignification, receptionism, all kinds of theories, all being asserted over and against the other theories. We have for centuries tried to unlock the mystery, solve the insolvable and win the argument about the Eucharist.

Many Episcopalians stopped trying to solve this. Most Episcopalians believe in what is called Real Presence. We believe that Christ is present in the meal, but we do not know how. In other words, if you want to go with Transubstantiation as your explanation, go right ahead. You want to align with the symbolic doctrine? That is ok, too – well, maybe not so much the covered dish meal.... The point is, there is a mystery there. Perhaps the only thing that matters is that we have – somehow, someway – a real connection to Jesus Christ through the Eucharist. There is a Real Presence of Christ in the meal that gives us a connection we need, in which we experience the love of God through the presence of Christ. There is a real power in that presence.

We need that power. It sustains us in our life. Jesus gave us the command to serve and to love. Those commands are intertwined, because it is out of our love that we continue to serve and it is out of love that we forget who ranks higher among us, we lose the sense of hierarchy and become true neighbors, true community, true disciples. Perhaps Jesus gave us this Eucharist so Christ could help us keep those commands to serve and to love one another, so we can be less hierarchical. Christ is present in the bread and wine, the body and blood, pouring out the love of God, serving us, sustaining us, nurturing us, and nourishing us.

How is Christ present in the meal? I don't know. But, if we believe what we hear in the Gospel, in Paul's letters, in the story of our forebears, then we can believe that in the Eucharist, we do more than merely remember Christ. We become part of that story; we become God's chosen people. Christ empties himself, pours out God's love on us all, out of obedience to God. Even tonight.... even though Jesus knows humanity betrayed him already. Even though he

knows that humanity will continue to betray him after he is handed over to the powers and principalities of darkness, Jesus loves us to the end. We are forgiven for our betrayal, even on this night when all is stripped bare. Even tonight, we are strengthened in love, given sustenance to carry out the mission of Christ, to love and serve. We are given hope for the future. Jesus gives us the command to remember him, so that we might be united to Christ, experience the love of Christ, and participate in the work of Christ.