

April 5, 2012

Maundy Thursday

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

Growing up in New Jersey, where there is a substantial Jewish population, I spent a lot of time going to Bar and Bat Mitzvahs in when I was 12 and 13. In fact, I went to so many, that I kept a spare Yarmulke in my sport jacket. But, one of the great memories I have is going with my family to another family's house for a Seder. I remember it well and I still feel incredibly blessed to have participated in that family meal. I can still hear the host family singing Dayenu whenever my memory takes me to that Seder. It was a privilege to be there, because of the importance the Jewish people place on the Passover, which the Seder celebrates. To be welcome into a home for a Seder is a privilege, because it is an invitation to share and celebrate in the story of a people, and it is a window into their identity as people who celebrate their covenant with God and their deliverance by God from bondage in Egypt. Their identity is wrapped into that meal, into that story. As Christians, our identity is that as a people of the New Covenant. The New Covenant is the new relationship with God, given by Jesus Christ to the Apostles, and through them all who believe in Christ. As people of the New Covenant we put our trust in Jesus Christ and we live according to the mandates given to us by Jesus Christ.

Today is Maundy Thursday; Maundy is a form of the word mandate from which we also derive the word commandment. So tonight, we remember the mandate given to us by Jesus Christ, the commandment that we love one another as Jesus loves us. Jesus emphasizes that this love is characterized by humility and service, and demonstrates this by washing the feet of the disciples. Service and humility have therefore become models for many Christians and churches, and many have at least gotten quite good at the service part of the model. However, it is also important to stress that the call to service is rooted in a deeper call, which is to be in relationship with Jesus. We participate in the story of Jesus, not only through service, but through allowing ourselves, our identity, and character to be shaped by Jesus, our Lord who is willing to cleanse, to shape us, to empower us first, if we will allow it.

Perhaps this is one of the difficulties in being a new Covenant people, because it requires that we admit we need to be helped, that we are not fully self-sufficient. It requires that we admit we have not fully allowed ourselves to be shaped by the Good news of God in Christ. It might be easier to simply serve others, offer ourselves as volunteers in a myriad of activities which keep us busy, without being in the full relationship Jesus is offering us. This is the pattern Jesus wants to break, honoring commandments without being in relationship to God.

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me”, says Jesus. Jesus is clear with Peter, is clear with us, in order to be in relationship with God, then we have to

allow ourselves to receive the hospitality of Jesus, to receive the cleansing, to be shaped by God's character found in Jesus. Our identity as people of the New Covenant is always under formation, as we continually put our trust in Jesus and allow ourselves to be shaped by Jesus.

This process of growing in faith, of being shaped by Jesus, is why we continue to meet week in and week out, year after year, to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. Jesus gave us our tradition of Communion, shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. We find this noted in three of the four Gospel accounts and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul notes that he is passing along to the people in Corinth what was passed along to him. This letter, written within 20 years of the death and resurrection, shows that communion, receiving the body and blood of Christ, was already a tradition, a foundation of Christian life, in the nascent stages of our faith life, and was established by Jesus. "Do this in remembrance of me" is the other mandate we recognize on Maundy Thursday.

When we gather for the Eucharist, we pronounce that Jesus was crucified by powerful and wicked forces that exist in our world, that Jesus defeated these powers, and that those who abide in Christ are freed from those very same powers. We recognize ourselves as being delivered from sin and death by God through Christ. It is an Exodus story which changes our relationship to God, to each other and to the world around us. In communion, we pronounce the story of Jesus Christ, we participate in that story; it becomes our story, as a people of the New Covenant. Our identity is very much connected to this meal.

Paul is aware of this connection, which is why he takes the Church in Corinth to task in this letter to the Corinthians. They are participating in a Lord's Supper that creates class distinction in a church already troubled with strife over various issues. They continue to exist in manners that do not necessarily point to a new life shaped by Christ. They participate in the Lord's Supper, but are not changed by it. Much in the manner that Peter did not want to be washed clean by Jesus, the people of Corinth resist being washed clean through the story of Jesus, and in doing so they incur judgment on themselves.

I am confident that Paul is not asking them to be sinless or perfect before participating in the Lord's Supper. After all, the Apostles who handed the tradition to Paul, all fled when Jesus was arrested. They were all in hiding after Jesus was crucified. They stalled as a community after Jesus appeared to them. Yet, over time, they allowed themselves to be shaped by Christ, and began to live as people of the New Covenant. This is what Paul is after with the church in Corinth. He is saying to them, straighten yourselves out. If you will not let yourselves be changed by Christ, if you will not allow yourselves to be washed by Christ, then you have no share with Christ. Allow Christ to shape your way of being.

So it is with us. Even on this very night, we are encouraged to remember our identity, to reflect on ways we participate in the narrative of Jesus Christ and also

ways we reject Christ's love and hospitality. We will then ask for forgiveness and come to the table, participate in the story, and continue to be shaped by Jesus, proclaiming our identity in anticipation of the day when Christ comes again and counts us as Christ's own. Jesus says, Do this in remembrance of me. Even as he faces his betrayal, Jesus awaits us with the grace of God.