

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

The Gospel | John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Date | Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

“WHAT DOES FREEDOM LOOK LIKE TO YOU THIS YEAR?”

Shackled hands, daring to break those chains, illustrated this provocative question, posed on yesterday's Atlanta Jewish Times cover. Somehow that publication tapped a restlessness we're all feeling, living for so long with various experiences of lockdown, longing for greater personal and communal freedoms. In our complicated city, as in many others, faithful religious observance has proven tricky, during this year's COVID-constrained concurrence of Jewish Passover and Christian Holy Week.

Passovers I have known previously with Jewish friends in their homes have given me a love for modern rituals like the orange on the seder plate, contemporary complements to Passover's ancient tale, extolling God's mighty deeds of power that freed the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Many of those same liberation stories show up in our Christian tradition during Holy Week. Passover remembrance was an integral part of Jesus' faith and devotion, as a Jewish man living through Roman occupation of the Holy Land.

Tonight's Scriptures bear witness to Jesus, saying farewell to his friends, just after they have celebrated Passover together in Jerusalem. His prayers and gestures have been memorialized in the central sacred meal Christians have practiced throughout centuries. A holy meal distinctly different from Passover but equally concerned with connections between divine deliverance and the exercise of human freedoms.

I so am grateful we FINALLY are free to share holy communion again after so long and arduous a fast, though tonight's Eucharist clearly will lack freedoms we have known in former times. We will not kneel side by side at an altar rail. Nor will we welcome a wafer pressed into our palms by a priest. There is no chalice to guide toward willing lips. As with most worship adaptation in this season, our return to this meal has been a complex exercise in discernment involving both freedom and responsibility.

We are not so different from Jesus' friends who gathered on the night before he was betrayed. We journey from different places. We arrive fatigued, carrying grief and longings that threaten to eclipse our joy in this practice of remembrance. Many have known deep losses in this past year.

Even if relief at receiving this sacrament again prevails, for the most part, some of us have a hard time feeling much at all. Others are still deciding when they might feel safe to come back to the block. Jesus draws near to us wherever and however we find ourselves, just as he embraced his disciples without condition. Even the ones who would use their freedom against him. Here at our Lord's table we find ourselves charged as they were, by his not-so-novel commandment, the first, last, and greatest of all, always challenging us to keep love at the center.

Like someone with death on his mind, Jesus speaks about what matters most. Love, actually. His tone and actions take that urgent turn. Washing their feet in the middle of dinner, as if it will help them start to grasp the precious little time they have left together.

Love is what presses us all, in the end, to wrestle with life's beauty and pain, with moral contradictions and conflicted values, with regrets we cherish alongside joyful connections in those potent memories we carry with us to the grave.

Sitting around that table with Jesus, after feasting on deliverance stories and songs of thanksgiving, maybe these friends all could set aside trepidation for a moment, yielding fears about the future to a later hour. There, Jesus calls them back to the present with an invitation so familiar it might have escaped their notice on any other night, "Just as I have loved you, so you also must love one another." As if to admonish them: "Dear ones, please don't forget! God is present at all times and in all places, wherever selfless love liberates."

Tonight we lift up our hearts, hungry for what can never die. Flesh and blood grace is here for us all, sweeping us into that mystery that is God's endless life of perfect love. Such divine self-giving pours forth to any and all with out-stretched palms ready to receive the salvation offered in the body of Christ, the bread of heaven.

God for us.

God with us.

God in us.

Whatever else freedom looks like this year or any other, may it find us rejoicing always in this feast of the world's redemption, where our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, feeds us with himself, giving us everything we need to love one another as freely, faithfully, and fully as God loves each of us. Amen.