

John 13:1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

John 13:12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to

them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

1Cor. 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

THE AGAPE FEAST

Craig Satterlee told of a Maundy Thursday service that was held in a very small church, a church that he would later serve as pastor.

Craig said that during the years that they didn’t have their own pastor the people at St. Timothy’s found an

ingenious way to do a Maundy Thursday service. The members of that small church held what they called an “agape feast.” It was loosely based on the Jewish Passover meal, the Seder.

Basically they had a church supper that included Scripture readings by some of the members. Toward the end of the meal a pastor from a neighboring church would arrive after leading worship at his own church so that the people could take communion.

Craig said that on the first Maundy Thursday he served in this parish the major question was whether to have hot dogs or pot roast! (They decided on pot roast.) Anyway, the service was in the word of this new pastor “truly a love feast.” He was “amazed” by their love for one another.

FOOT WASHING

The second year that Craig served this church the people wanted to do something a bit more worshipful without losing the agape feast. Their new pastor explained that the word Maundy comes from the Latin word for commandment. It refers to the new commandment that Jesus gave his followers, that they should love one another as Jesus had loved them.

“Some churches,” he said, “wash feet on Maundy Thursday as a way of remembering how Jesus washed his disciples’ feet.” In this way the people are reminded of how we share in the call of Jesus to humbly serve one another in love.

The congregation was not so sure about this foot-washing thing. One person asked, “Do you want us to take off our shoes and socks in church and have our feet washed?”

The pastor suggested that it might be better to do it before they ate a meal together. In that way it would be a kind of re-enactment of that Last Supper.

It was still a hard sell. Some suggested they might not be able to do it. The pastor replied, “I think we have to try it, and then talk about what God’s up to.”

FOUR YEARS OF FOOT WASHING

They did try it. The worship committee chair brought a pitcher, basin and lots of towels. And it was decided that those who didn’t want their feet washed could have their hands washed instead.

The pastor began by washing the feet of the people as they came forward. After a while another member of the church tapped him on the shoulder and asked if could take over.

Before long others were taking their turn. Over supper the people talked about what it felt like to wash other people's feet.

Almost everyone agreed that they didn't mind washing other people's feet; it was when their own feet were washed that they felt uncomfortable. Taking off their shoes made them feel vulnerable. Someone said that loving each other as Jesus first loved us means to put ourselves in a vulnerable position.

And so they decided it was a good practice and it continued it for the next four years.

The chair of the worship committee started bringing her pitcher and basin to church on the Sundays when they had a baptism, and they used that instead of the finger bowl and wooden stand that was their baptismal font.

She also brought it on special Sundays like Easter and All Saints Day. The people were invited to dip their fingers in the water and remember their baptism.

THE LAST SUPPER

The fifth Maundy Thursday was Craig's last with this little church. The church was preparing to close, and their minds were on giving up their church and its furnishings. They would be going their separate ways.

After their final agape meal in the fellowship hall they made their way into sanctuary to celebrate communion on Maundy Thursday for the last time.

As is the custom in many churches after the service they would strip the altar in remembrance of Christ being stripped for us. Someone in the back would read Psalm 22.

“My God, my god, why have you forsaken me. Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning.”

When the time came to strip the altar the minister was in for a surprise. Instead of just the members of the worship committee coming to take the items from

the altar, all of the members of the congregation were spontaneously getting up from their seats and lining the center aisle.

They would come, receive something from the altar and then return to their places to kneel and pray. Craig felt tears well up in his eyes and run down his cheeks.

And then it occurred to him that he needed something for everyone who came forward to remove from the altar. So he scrambled to think of things. He gave them candlesticks, offering plates, pulpit Bible, a hymnal, and his stole.

He said that when nothing was left they folded the pulpit and the altar clothes and carried them out of the church.

They returned to the fellowship hall and spoke in hushed whispers.

Someone said, "We're sorry we ruined the service."

Craig replied, "What makes you think that you ruined the service?"

"You were crying."

The minister replied that he wasn't upset; he was moved by the symbolism of what the congregation had done.

Another person said, "It's your fault. You told us to participate."

WONDROUS LOVE

That's what Maundy Thursday is all about. It's about participating in the mystery of God's love amid the fragility of our mortal lives.

When we do that, it will be an emotional experience.

What will we have left when one day everything is stripped away by the ravages of time, and we turn out the lights for the final time?

There is only one thing that will remain, and that one thing is love, the love our Savior has for us, and the love we have for each other.

The hymn puts it well,
"What wondrous love is this ... O my soul, O my soul?"

This is the song we sing in our hearts when we take the bread and the cup ... when we remember the body broken and the blood shed for us.

THE MANDATE

But, it is not just the song we sing or the words we speak.

Wondrous love is an action we take. It is a mandate. It is a love that we show toward others.

It is a love born of deep gratitude and grace.

Sometimes I am discouraged when I see people taking communion in a nonchalant way. It shows that they do not understand the importance of the sacrament.

It's not just about what happened long ago. It's about what happens here and now.

How do you respond to a person who gives everything away, even his own life as an expression of love? What would you say to such a person as they eat their last meal?

I think that you would vow to remember, and you would vow to do something good, something loving with the life that you have been given.

That is exactly what Jesus was asking his disciples to do long ago, and that is exactly what Jesus is asking us to do tonight.

Jesus is commanding us to remember his love and spread that love to others.

PASSOVER TRANSFORMED

Actually that first communion service began as a Passover meal was transformed into something new.

When the Jews took the Passover meal, they didn't just eat a meal and recite some Scripture. They became a part of the story. Through the liturgy history came alive for them.

They are the slaves who are mistreated by the Egyptians. They are the ones who are set free by the hand of a mighty God.

This was the mood. This was the kind of anticipation and holy awareness that permeated the upper room on the night of that last meal.

But, the Passover was more than just a time to make sacred history come alive.

It was also a time to look forward in hope toward God's future.

In the modern Jewish Passover meal, a meal called the Seder, there is an empty place setting at the table. It is a spot prepared for Elijah.

Elijah you'll remember was supposed to come back from heaven and proclaim the coming of the Messiah.

I wonder if they might have done something like that back in Jesus' day.

And maybe after the traditional Passover liturgy Jesus took the bread that was meant for Elijah and broke it and said,

“This is my body, broken for you.”

And maybe Jesus took that cup that was meant for Elijah and said,

“This is my blood, shed for you.”

PROBLEMS TRANSFORMED

Communion is never taken in isolation from the problems of our world. The problems of our world have formed the backdrop for communion from the very beginning.

It was on the same night in which he was betrayed that this meal was celebrated.

One of the disciples whom Jesus served so humbly was the very disciple who betrayed him, and another disciple whom Jesus served was the very disciple who denied him.

In fact when you think of it the elements of communion represent the worst that the world can do ... body broken and blood shed.

But, in communion Jesus took the worst that the world could do, the worst that we can do and made it a sign of love and hope.

What greater love can a person have than to lay down his life for his friends?

So, when we take this bread and when we take this cup we are celebrating a new kind of Passover meal.

We are celebrating deliverance from death. We are celebrating deliverance from our sinful and treacherous ways. We are celebrating a God who loves us so much that He would even have His Son die for us.

Tonight is a holy, sober moment.

It is a time when we strip away all those things from our life that are unnecessary ... which is just about everything when you think about it.

And we leave the one thing that really matters, a cross upon which body was broken and blood was shed for our sins and our salvation.

If you really understand this moment, if you really participate in this worship, there may be tears.

It is not an easy thing to say goodbye to the old way of life. It is not an easy thing to see a sacrifice like this ... especially when we know that it is for us and because of us that this sacrifice is made.

But, when we eat this bread and drink this cup we also look forward to that Great Day when Jesus comes again. We acknowledge that deceit and treachery will not have the last word in our world.

Even death will not have the final say.

We'll have more to say about that later in the week.

But, right now we eat this bread and drink this cup. We remember his love, and remember his mandate, his great command to us,

“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Amen.