

Maundy Mandate: Eat. Drink. Remember. Serve. Be Thankful. Be Free.
A Homily for St. John the Baptist's Episcopal Church, Minneapolis
by The Rev. Craig Lemming
Maundy Thursday, March 29, 2018

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; that we may evermore dwell in Love and Service, so that Love and Service may dwell in us. Amen.

We find our identity in rituals. The particular ways we practice our modes of being shape the sort of persons we are becoming. Rituals weave the fabric of our lives together. The particular ways we prepare and enjoy our meals, or clean up, or cultivate relationships, or exercise, or relax, do not merely organize the ways we choose to spend hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, or years of our existence; these rituals become who we are. As members of The Episcopal Church we love the sacred rituals that shape our Spiritual modes of Being. We neither subscribe to common Dogma nor do we submit to a common Doctrine, in our catholic-yet-protestant Anglican orientation to Faith, we gather in Common Prayer. Our rituals in Holy Worship organize the sacred ways we choose to make meaning of the hours, days, weeks, months, seasons, and years of our existence. This Maundy Thursday, like every Maundy Thursday that has ever been, reminds and re-affirms by way of sacred rituals – eating bread, drinking wine, remembering Christ's extravagant love for all people, serving each other by washing each other's feet, and being thankful – all of this reminds us who we are. Rituals become who we are. We become who we are in these sacred rituals.

It is for this reason that the Old Testament Lesson appointed for Maundy Thursday commemorates the institution of The First Passover. God declares,

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.¹

The ritual remembrance and observation of the Passover as a commemoration of the exodus redemption of God's people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land is indeed a ritual that has and is and always shall be celebrated throughout generations of our Jewish siblings in Faith. Scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures observe, "the heightened emotions of such celebrations help re-create for later generations the exultant experience of liberation. This historicization of festivals contributes to their enduring nature."² Similarly, *The Institution of the Lord's Supper* as a ritual feast of remembrance in the Christian tradition honors Jesus's Jewish identity. As a Jewish Rabbi, Jesus transforms the devotional meal at Passover into a continuing expression of God's liberation of all people to the new life of the Promised Land. Jesus invites us to ritually "do this in remembrance" of who we are: beloved children of God called to be free to love and to serve.

In our present cultural reality, when the murder of innocents has become an unholy ritual-sacrifice to the idols of Capitalism, our sacred Christian rituals become life-giving, counter-cultural decisions to resist hatred and to choose love. Professor of Religious Studies at Yale, Christian Ethicist, and Episcopalian Dr. Willis Jenkins writes beautifully about the ways our Liturgy ritually shapes the sort of person we choose to become. He writes,

¹ Exodus 12:14 (NRSV).

² Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 4th ed. (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.

The Christian practice of liturgy implies the sort of anthropology that makes persons susceptible to imaginative productions of desire. Humans are “liturgical animals,” whose imagination of what to love and how to desire it is learned through embodied performances.³

Recent findings by today’s scientific experts have detailed the innumerable benefits that we could enjoy from simply making time for a meal with our loved ones every evening.⁴ As I read through and pondered these fascinating scientific findings, I discovered and realized that an actual neurochemical process takes place within us at the dinner table. In those daily rituals we create sacred memories while sitting at supper with our families. We cherish beloved friends near and far, present or remembered; or witness strangers imperceptibly over the years become our soul mates. Those intimate moments at table are remembered in the cells of our bodies, memories encoded in our very identity which become the substance of our dreams. Meals shared and celebrated with loved ones are transformative rituals. We share the essence of who we are when we enjoy meals with each other and through our sharing of stories we make meaning of this strange, beautiful, and tragic existence together. Mahatma Gandhi once said, **“There are people in this world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”⁵** We find our true selves in each other’s existential hunger for “the bread of life” and the “cup of salvation.”

³ Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 309.

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/the-importance-of-eating-together/374256/>

⁵ Donna Sinclair, *The Spirituality of Bread* (Kelowna, B.C.: Northstone, 2007), 26.

Our Maundy Thursday remembrance of Christ's institution of the Holy Sacrament of his Body and Blood and his exquisite example of servanthood in washing his loved ones' feet are the sacred rituals which define our deepest desire: to love and to serve. As the seventh-century mystic Saint Isaac of Nineveh writes:

Did not the LORD share the table of tax collectors and harlots? So then — do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy. All must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve.⁶

When we share food with those who are different to us, as Jesus did ritually, we participate in one of the most intimate and beautiful human acts there is. Sharing food unites as us equals: we put the same food into our bodies and are transformed and sustained by it and grow in relationship together. This ritual is one of the most powerful, politically subversive, and life-giving acts we can share to resist Empire's commitment to crucifixion and death. In Jesus' ritual modes of Being: through the radical welcome of all people in table fellowship and in serving others we are resurrected to new life. It is a mode of existence based on unconditional love and on the spiritual practice of gratitude. It is a beautiful way of life steeped in the pleasure of sharing our food, our money, our gifts, our time, our service, and our presence generously; a ritual mode of being grounded in the

⁶ Paul Fromberg, *The Art of Transformation: Three Things Churches Do That Change Everything* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 16.

compassionate concern for the well-being of all people. *This* is indeed the abundant life we are promised by, with, and in Christ Jesus.⁷ We need only practice it. Our sacred Christian rituals help us to live life well.

Eat. Drink. Remember. Celebrate. Serve. Be Thankful. Be Free.

Amen.

⁷ John 10:10.