

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for April 2, 2014 ~ Maundy Thursday
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

On this night we remember and celebrate the final supper Jesus shared with his disciples in the context of Passover. This event, which reveals the holiness of all subsequent meals eaten in his name, institutes the mystery of his abiding redemptive presence in the Church's celebration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Eucharist.

This evening also marks the beginning of the most solemn and joyful celebration of the entire Christian year. We are entering what St. Augustine referred to as the "Triduum during which the Lord died, was buried, and rose again." From the beginning of tonight's gathering until the conclusion of Sunday's, we are involved in one continuous liturgy of the Paschal Mystery.

In our experience tonight, let us go with Jesus and his disciples to the Upper Room and with the eyes of our hearts, let us see what happens there.

Jesus instituted the Christian Eucharist.

When we say he instituted the Eucharist, we do not mean he invented an entirely new rite. The actions of that Last Supper, the taking of the bread and wine, the giving of thanks, the sharing in the food and drink, were all well-known and quite regular Jewish observances. What was new was the significance with which Jesus invested the familiar actions.

The events of the first Passover meal in Egypt were on their minds that night. They remembered sprinkling of the blood of the sacrificial lamb and the feast celebrated with Moses and the elders in commemoration of God's covenant with his people. In that context, Jesus, at the table with them, spoke of a new covenant.

The German New Testament scholar Heinz Schürmann also suggests one novel feature in the action of Jesus in the Last Supper. Instead of allowing each one present to drink of his own individual cup, Jesus passes **his** cup around to all present. In Jewish meals, according to Schürmann, it was customary for the celebrant of the meal to pass his own cup to someone whom he wished to single out for special honor, thus allowing that person to share in the blessing the celebrant had said over the cup – a custom similar to our drinking a toast. Jesus shares his cup with **all** of his disciples because he is making them all partakers of the benefits of his passion.

He did this not because they deserved it. One would deny him, another would betray him, all would fall asleep on him during the vigil he asked them to keep in the garden. And he knew it already. You and I, who drink from his cup tonight, don't deserve it either. Some of us deny him, others betray him, all of us disappoint him, have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God.

Jesus' self-giving act would establish a new bond between God and his people. The Eucharist would stand as a sign of that bond. Those who deserved to be abandoned or held aloof would be brought even closer. Those who deserved punishment would be forgiven. Those who deserved impoverish-

ment because they tried to seize life from another, would be given life as a free gift. Those who deserved to eat alone would have a communal meal. This was a victory banquet, celebrated in advance – and it still is!

Jesus also instituted the Christian Priesthood on that holy night.

This is of tremendous importance to the renewal and future of the Church. Jesus' command, "do this" is given to the whole community and the Eucharist is the action and focal point in which the whole Church expresses its priesthood. The Celebrant acts as the representative and mouthpiece of the priesthood of the whole Church. But it is the whole Church that is called to be the priesthood of believers. We are admitted to and anointed for that royal priesthood in our Baptism. When the priesthood of believers gathers around the holy table to share in this Holy Meal, the covenant is ratified and the community is reunited in it.

The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*. It means "bridge builder." As the priests of Jesus Christ, you and I together are sent into the world to build bridges across the chasms that exist – between rich and poor, between weak and strong, between black and white between Jews and anti-Semitic thugs in East Ukraine and the American West. And, there will be times when we must lay down our own lives and become the bridge ourselves.

And, on that night Jesus also gave a new commandment for those who would be a part of the new covenant – "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Obedience to this new commandment is crucial. John's gospel informs us that Jesus did something to impress upon his priestly people the meaning of this commandment. He rose from the table, took a towel, and washed their feet. Peter protested, "You shall never wash my feet." But Jesus told him, "If I do not wash your feet, you will no longer be my disciple." So, Peter answered, "Lord, do not wash only my feet, then. Wash my hands and my head also."

Jesus drove home the point that the horizontal fellowship of Christians may not be detached from the vertical dimension of Christ's love for his people, a love exhibited in his sacrificial death, of which the foot washing was the symbol.

The custom of foot washing has been restored to mainline churches. Our prayer book has had provisions for this rite now for thirty-six years. We will perform it tonight. As we do, the image of the towel and basin remind us of the love that Christ has shown us and calls us to show for one another and the world at our doorstep. Only when we are willing to humble ourselves before one another and become servants to one another will the world be able to believe that we are the disciples of Jesus.

Eucharist – Priesthood – Self-giving Love for one another. These three extend through time and space from that Upper Room in Jerusalem long ago to us gathered here tonight. Let us not take them for granted or take them lightly. Let us instead celebrate them with deepest devotion so that our very lives may be transformed into a sacrament that will bring nourishment and healing to our fevered world.