

Maundy Thursday 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 9, 2020

John 13:1-17, 31b-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Friends:

A few Christian churches are holding public worship services, still. Most, like this congregation, have cancelled public worship. Four days ago, on Palm Sunday, we gave out communion wafers that had been part of a eucharistic liturgy two days earlier. Wafers only. In plastic zipper bags. Virtually a complete abdication of every practice I know concerning the sacrament of holy communion. On Palm Sunday, I distinctly heard a rumbling as every great thinker, bishop, and theologian turned over in their graves.

The pandemic necessitates our staying at a great distance from one another, And from sharing things with one another that we have touched. It's a dastardly virus for the Church's celebration of holy communion. At Dove of Peace, we are not celebrating communion weekly, in violation of article 24 of the Explanation of the Augsburg Confession. We did not offer wine, but bread only, reversing a central plank of the Reformation. We created a gap of space and time between the prayer and the words of institution, on the one hand, and the distribution, on the other, also a violation of Lutheran teaching. Some Lutheran churches encourage their members at home to break out their own bread and wine, at home in front of their computer screens, and participate in the eucharistic celebration via the internet. This, too, is a violation of the meaning of the sacrament. And then there are the Lutheran congregations and leaders who have happily cancelled holy communion until further notice, which literally means the excommunication of all of their members.

There is no solution. There is no way under these circumstances to keep the mass and to share the sacrament in a manner consistent with Lutheran theology. You either do it wrongly or incompletely, or you don't do it at all. Which places pastors and other church leaders in the unexpected and unwelcome situation of trying to choose between half a loaf, so to speak, and no loaf at all. So to speak.

If you were to ask most Christians about why we celebrate holy communion they would tell you that Jesus began this ritual on Thursday night, the night before his crucifixion. At the Last Supper. They would turn to Paul's words from our second reading. Words recited at our altar on those occasions when we DO have communion. Take and eat. This is my body. Given for you.

So that impression of why we celebrate communion comes from Paul. And from some of the gospel writers. Lutherans tend to cluster around Paul and his teachings. Which is not a bad thing, in my view.

But the last supper, according to John, does not have holy communion, or what we sometimes call the “institution,” the creation, the launch of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Last Supper is described in the gospel according to Mark in nine verses. The Last Supper is described in the gospel according to Matthew in ten verses. In Luke’s gospel, the Last Supper is described in 25 verses. But in John’s gospel, the last supper is described in 154 verses. Five whole chapters. The description is six times longer than Luke. Fifteen times longer than Mark. With all of that, you’d think John would included the institution of the sacrament of holy communion. But he didn’t. All that space. All that time. Either he thought it didn’t happen that way, or he didn’t think it was worth writing down.

Now, I’m fairly confident that John believed that the thing we call holy communion flows out of the life and work of Jesus Christ. There’s a whole section of John called “I am the bread of life.” And another section called “I am the vine.” So in this gospel, Jesus identifies himself as bread for us, as vine for us. He just doesn’t do it in the way we expect. He just doesn’t do it in the place that we expect. He doesn’t make it part of a Passover meal. He doesn’t create a memorial out of his last supper. It’s *there*. It’s just different. It’s just not what you expect, in the way you expect, in the place that you expect.

So in this time of pandemic and maintaining physical distances, we have a lot of consternation and disruption in the church of Christ, in particular about holy communion. But just as John has Christ’s body and blood, bread and vine, different than what we expect, different than the way we expect, in a different place than we expect, you and I now have to re-think things and open our hearts and our minds. God’s presence in our lives may not fit in the frame that we’ve normally had it in. We’ve framed Christ’s presence in a frame made by Paul. And that’s fine. But there’s this other frame by a guy named John. And it’s very different. And if the Paul frame isn’t fitting the emergency that we are in, maybe we should let the written word of God– the Bible, the book of John– speak to us about another framework.

154 verses on the Last Supper. What happens in those verses, if not breaking bread and new covenants? Well, a lot happens. Jesus talks a lot about being absent. He says things like, *“A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.”* And they murmur about it amongst themselves. *Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’? They were upset. They talked about that. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* And Jesus tells them that this absence is necessary. *Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.* The absence of Jesus is for his followers’ advantage, for their benefit. Because only then

can the Advocate, the Paraclete, come to them. Is Jesus talking just to the Twelve, or is he also talking to us? It is to your advantage that I go away. "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." These are the mysteries of the Last Supper, according to John. Not a promise of presence. But a promise that absence is necessary for more abundant life in a new realm of possibility.

154 verses about the Last Supper. Our gospel on this day has 21 and a half. The day—Maundy—is named for the New Commandment. Not a commandment to worship in some particular way. But a commandment to love one another. And the symbol of this love—the ritual of this love—is not breaking bread and lifting up cups of wine. The sacrament of this love is foot-washing. An act of service and humility on the part of one person that cleans and prepares another person for what is coming next. In the world of Jesus, not only did you have to wash your feet to transition from work outdoors to rest and nourishment indoors, but you had to wash your feet in order to enter into the presence of God. To go into a temple. And so the Maundy Thursday ritual of foot-washing is first a model of us for love and service to others—*concrete* love and service to others— but also a kind of service that helps people move forward, and closer to the presence of God.

So in the days ahead, as the viral pandemic exerts a force of fear and isolation and anxiety upon us and those we love, the events of Maundy Thursday provide glimmers in the dark. Sometimes the absence of Christ is part of the way that God renews and reveals his presence for the future. Sometimes we have to let the Word of God challenge the framing of our spiritual reality, and give us a new frame. And, as we are exhorted in multiple places in the Bible, to love one another. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. You are not asked to overcome death and sin, to conquer history and nature. But while Christ is overcoming death and sin, and rising above history and nature, he simply asks us to take a towel, and to do the concrete works of love exemplified by the washing of feet. Amen.