



Maundy Thursday

This Feast Is for You

[RCL] Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Welcome to Maundy Thursday. Welcome to the feast of God's boundless hospitality.

If you have ever been the person who was not invited to the party, this feast is for you, for all are invited here.

If you have ever been the person who knocked on doors that were never answered, this feast is for you, for all are received here.

If you have ever been the person without a seat at the table, this feast is for you, for all are welcomed here.

Today, the meal is ready and the washbasin is full, and we are ushered into the Upper Room, into the intimate, inner heart of things, where Jesus waits for us. And even if you have never felt included before, today you are the honored guest, a seat is held for you, and there is space enough for everyone. Look around at your companions in the lamplight, disciples and wanderers, each face a part of God's story—here there are saints and sinners, the found and the lost. Here, we all belong. At this feast, there are no outsiders.

"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you," Jesus says in Luke's gospel, and in today's account from John, he invites his companions in to share the meal, having "loved them to the end." And so, his ministry ends as it began, with an invitation:

Come, eat at my table, rest and be washed clean, and see how fervently I have wished to bring you close to me. Though you might betray me, though you might deny me, my love will not fail, and my hospitality will never falter. True, the path ahead is narrow and the gate is small, but it will always be open to you. I will not turn you away.

Hospitality might not be the first thing we think of today, at the outset of the Triduum, but as we enter into these three days of holy mystery, perhaps it should be on our minds. For nothing that lies ahead of us between now and Easter morning—the gravity and the grief and the glory—can make sense until we recognize that God's posture toward humanity has always been one of infinite openness and welcome.

Only a deep and abiding hospitality, a desire to gather us in and care for us, can explain the lavish mercy that exists on both sides of the Cross.

Maundy Thursday, then, is not just a narrative prologue to the events of Good Friday and Holy Saturday and Easter but reveals within itself the cosmic impulse behind our imminent salvation. The feast at Jesus' table is the culmination of a consistent characteristic of God's relationship with us: a longing to welcome us into the innermost chamber of the Divine life and to share that life with us in eternal companionship.

This pattern of God's hospitality is conveyed throughout Holy Scripture; we have always been saved by meals. In the beginning, God formed the earth and then welcomed humanity as beloved guests to revel in the feast of creation. Later, God offered the Passover feast as a sign of deliverance for the children of Israel from all that binds and oppresses and degrades. Then, God prepared a feast of manna in the wilderness and bid Israel come and savor the taste of their liberation.

And now on this day, a new feast is ready, and it is a feast for all people. It comes from the same wellspring of God's generosity as all the feasts of old, but it is also radically different, for it is a feast that somehow consists of God's own body, God's own essence. Everything is on the table, so to speak; no greater hospitality can ever be offered to us.

And then, of course, there is the washing.

"You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand," Jesus says, cradling our tired feet in his hands—and within them all of those aching memories of the long road that has brought us to this place. He washes them gently, as if holding a newborn child, because tonight something new is indeed being born—a new commandment, a new possibility, a new world in which love and service are the final authority. And somehow the washing and the feast are inseparable aspects of all of this.

How desperately we have needed this gift through the long, lean years. For we live in a Spirit-starved world, a world where love too often feels inaccessible, like a banquet glimpsed through a closed window or a beautiful song written for someone else. But not today. Today, the music plays for you, and today the meal has been prepared to satiate your soul's deepest hunger. Today, Jesus has brought us to a "Last Supper" which is actually the beginning, where we taste and see the fullness of God's offering of new life to us. Where we are bathed in the promise of mercy. The only question is whether we can bear to trust and accept what is given.

We have not known this way before. This world has not taught us to believe in the power of such things. How could we possibly comprehend such abundant tenderness, when life is usually so hard and mean? Bruised by sorrow, encased within our defenses, how could we dream that we might be saved by the softness of God's caress, the nourishment of God's body? Is it any wonder Peter resists, confused and alarmed in the face of such inconceivable gentleness?

And yet we want to believe, Lord. We want to follow your commandment. Underneath our callouses and our callousness, we want to conceive of such a love and live it out. We want to know what it feels like, finally, to arrive home, to rest, to cease our relentless search for belonging, and to offer others that same experience. So, give us the courage to try. In the giving and the receiving, in the washing and in the being washed, in the feeding and being fed, help us to feel your presence, God. Help us to continue on in your name.

Because yes, too many of us have known the loneliness of not being invited to the party and the silence of the unanswered door. Too many of us have never had a seat at the tables of this world. And so, we are hungry and we are tired and we are afraid, but we are here, and we want to believe. So be patient with us, God, as we learn to accept that we do in fact deserve your hospitality, and that in your eyes, we have always deserved it. Be patient with us, for this has been a long time coming. In fact, we've been waiting our whole lives for such an invitation as this, and now we stand at the threshold of everything you offer us, everything you are, trembling with wonder and hope.

May we be the guests you have been waiting for. May we receive your love and love you in return. And may this Maundy Thursday be the moment, at long last, when we glimpse the hospitality of your salvation, and the salvation of your hospitality—a people and their God at one table, nourished, washed clean, and finally, forever, home.

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