



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday

Remember

[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

Remembering is an essential aspect of human nature. We remember a number of things, both good and bad, but we remember especially those things that influence and affect us and make a difference in our lives. This is why we are able to see much importance being given to remembering in several religious traditions and cultures. Still, remembering is not simply a cerebral act. When we remember religious stories, myths, and songs, it is a way of reembodying and reliving the past. When we perform rituals of remembrance, the ancient becomes intimate to and within us. This embodiment of the past in religious rituals doesn't happen simply for the sake of it, but rather in order to make a difference in the present.

This power of remembering becomes evident on Maundy Thursday. As we know, Maundy Thursday is the day when the Church recalls the Last Supper of our Lord, the event in the life of Jesus which forms the basis for the sacrament of the Eucharist. One of the key elements in the theology of the Eucharist is captured in the Greek word "*anamnesis*," which means "remembrance." *Anamnesis* comes from the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). We also see this being emphasized in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We can see that the early Church clearly recalled that when Jesus blessed the bread and the wine and shared them with his disciples, he had asked them to do it in order to remember him. It is precisely because of this commandment of Jesus that we celebrate the Eucharist and regard it as one of the two great sacraments, along with baptism.

However, to be clear, Jesus did not invent an entirely new tradition here. This idea of remembering goes back to the Passover. In the first lesson, we read about Moses instituting the first Passover among the people of Israel who were in bondage in Egypt. He instructed them to slaughter an unblemished lamb, smear its blood on the doorpost, and eat the roasted meat with unleavened bread and bitter herbs in a hurry before they set out on the long journey toward freedom. It was a tradition that was to be passed on and followed by all generations to mark the night of their escape from slavery. Thus, among other things, the Passover is the remembrance and celebration of God's liberation of his people from the powers of slavery and oppression.

Jesus, being a good Jew who would have certainly heard this story from his parents as a child, also remembered and celebrated this great thanksgiving for God's salvation on the night of his arrest. Using the

bread and wine as symbols of sacrifice and suffering, on his last supper before he was killed, he helped his disciples to trust in and envision God's liberation, even when sin, evil, and death seemed to triumph. In the events that followed the Last Supper – the Crucifixion and Resurrection – they were able to witness the historical demonstration of what was professed at the Passover. In other words, the Passover, which was remembered during the Last Supper, became a reality on Easter Day, even though they had difficulty accepting and believing it. This is why the followers of Jesus took seriously his commandment to remember (*anamnesis*) him as they broke the bread and shared the cup. It is also why we believe that Christ is present with us in the bread and the wine. We bow to the host and keep it in a special place because we believe it to be the real presence of Christ himself. On Maundy Thursday, we place the host at an altar of repose, which reminds us of the garden of Gethsemane. We watch and pray because we believe that the presence of Christ is as real today as it was two thousand years ago.

Anamnesis is not simply recalling and reenacting things from the past. It is to remember and *relive* past events in a way that matters to us in the present. *Anamnesis* then, in its truest form, should make a difference in our world today. In other words, it is a conscious recognition of the presence and application of the past to transform the world in the present. This means that Eucharist is more than blessing the bread and wine. It is more than breaking the bread and sharing the cup as Jesus did. It is also more than acknowledging the presence of Jesus in the host. So, what is it then? This is where we find the gospel lesson for Maundy Thursday helpful.

While other gospel writers and Paul remembered Jesus blessing the bread and the wine and proclaiming that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, the author of the fourth gospel, John, notices and writes about something different and deeper. He recalls that, during the supper, Jesus had done something unthinkable. He humbled himself like a lowly servant (actually a slave, “*doulos*”) and washed the feet of his disciples, including the one who was going to betray him, reminding them of the importance of humility and love. Thus, John seems to tell us that perhaps the most important aspect of the Last Supper which we remember and celebrate on Maundy Thursday, more than the bread and the wine, more than the rituals, is love: loving one another as Christ has loved us. Not sentimental, self-centered, and self-pleasing love, but self-sacrificing, self-emptying, and self-giving love. It is a love that goes beyond our narrow human-made boundaries and walls and builds bridges across differences while respecting those differences. It is a love that even bends down and washes the feet of those who may hate us. Love is exactly what Christ wants us to do! In fact, this is what the word Maundy stands for; the Latin word “*mandatum*” means “commandment.” On this night, Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples: to love one another. This means, as important as the bread and the wine are to the Eucharist, as necessary as our traditions and rituals of the Triduum are, we cannot overlook the crucial significance of love. In fact, without love, God’s love for the world that brings us together, and our love for one another, there is not and can be no meaningful celebration of the Eucharist.

Often the church gets too tied up in ritualism and traditionalism, too tied up in the “proper” way to do things, that we end up forgetting the most important reason and objective for Maundy Thursday, which is to love one another. This is why, in many of our churches, we practice the tradition of foot washing, to

remind ourselves to love one another as God has loved us. As we break the bread and share the cup, as we experience or witness the foot washing, we are reminded to go beyond the many barriers that divide us, transcend the hate that often surrounds us, and serve our fellow sisters and brothers in love. As we remember this Last Supper and the humble act of our Lord, and as we gather at the Lord's table to receive his body and blood, in person or in the spirit, may we remember to follow his command to love one another. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Dr. Joshua Samuel.***