

John 13:1-11
Maundy Thursday Meditation

April 9, 2020
Rev. David Pierce

“During supper Jesus, knowing the Father had put all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took a basin and towel and began to wash the disciples’ feet.”

We’re telling a different version of the story tonight. It’s not that we haven’t heard John’s version of Maundy Thursday before, of how Jesus, wanting to set the record straight on what real power in the world looks like, gets down on his hands and knees and washes the feet of his disciples—the master doing for the servant, and then capping things off by telling them, “Now you go and do likewise.”

This part of the story we’ve heard, maybe even memorized and tried to act out before. This is not what makes this version so different tonight. What makes this version so different is that John makes no mention of Communion. Every other gospel writer—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—describe Jesus as sitting down at a last supper with his friends. He takes bread and breaks it—“This is my body given for you.” Then he does similarly with a cup—“This is my blood poured out for you.” For centuries, these very words of institution have shaped and formed an institution for us on this night. What is Maundy Thursday without holy communion, without Eucharist? And yet John makes no mention of it. He says only that during supper Jesus got up from the table and began to wash some feet.

I wonder if you’ve ever looked at the table from the floor. It seems strange to me all of a sudden that this too isn’t a part of our Maundy Thursday service each year. Because Jesus broke bread, we break bread. Because he poured a cup, we pour a cup. Because he said, “This is my body and blood given for you,” we say “This is the body and blood of Jesus given for you.” So why don’t we ever get down on the floor around the table? After all, Jesus also did this.

I’ll tell you, the table looks different from down here. From down here, I can see all the scratch marks under the table, from where my children may have kicked each other a time or two because one or both of them wouldn’t pass the mac and cheese when it was asked

for. Or because they passed it, but not before taking a helping hand for themselves first. From down here, I can see all the crumbs that have been dropped—a reminder not only that I need to vacuum more, but also that I waste so much food, a reminder that in this world there are still five thousand times five thousand people starving for a couple loaves of bread. A reminder that with Jesus there is no difference between abundance and generosity. From down here, the crumbs also remind me of my Golden Retriever, and of that Canaanite woman we meet in the gospels who came to Jesus once begging for healing mercy on behalf of her tormented daughter. When Jesus told her he had come to serve only the children of Israel—“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”—the woman told him, “Yes but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

From under the table I can hear the words of Sojourner Truth: “I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?”

I will tell you, Kevin and I thought long and hard about what to do with Communion tonight. We belong to denominations that have made a way for us to serve and celebrate Communion together with you virtually in our homes these days, because let’s face it, we all need bread. Part of what we recall tonight is that the Israelites were out in the wilderness, miles away from slavery but they didn’t have bread, and they said, “We might as well go back to slavery.” We need bread to keep us from being afraid. And we need welcome to keep us from being alone. And what is Maundy Thursday without bread, without Eucharist, without Communion Table?

And yet, we could not get past the fact that not everyone does have bread in their homes these days. And while it seems to me, under the circumstances, that God would not mind us using whatever we’ve got in the cupboard—so long as we break it and pass it around it can be like the body of Christ to us—this seems like an appropriate time to be in solidarity with those who live their lives under the table right now, or who have no table at all, or no

home and family to call their own. And to remember that it was *during* the supper that Jesus got up, bent down, and washed some feet. No one was even finished eating yet, but John says it couldn't wait for Jesus, he wanted everyone to see what love really looks like.