

Homily: A New Covenant

Why are we gathered this evening? Most of us would say we're here for a time of remembrance. And, in part, we're right. But what are we gathered to remember? Is it to remember what Jesus did on the last night of his life and how he suffered and died on the cross for us? Or is it to remember the disciples and how they failed: Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied him and the rest of the disciples all ran away in fear. Or is it to remember the envy, hatred and fear of the temple authorities and scribes; those who turned the crowds of Jerusalem against Jesus. These are all aspects of Jesus' last night.

The Last Supper is much more than just a time of remembering. Memories are important and they teach us valuable lessons, but there was something very special about that meal for Jesus' disciples to continue the practice and pass it on to us. Acts 2:46-47 tells us that, after his ascension, the followers of Jesus gathered together in the temple every to praise God, and at home for fellowship and to share in a meal together with glad and generous hearts. They did so after working a full day. It must have meant a lot.

The meal they shared then, and we share tonight, wasn't a time of mourning and sorrow. There was no fear, envy or hatred involved. They were renewed, lifted up and encouraged when they gathered together. It's something they wanted to do and looked forward to.

Jesus himself set the tone for the meal. John 13:2-5 tells us what happened, "*Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.*"

Jesus knew what was about to happen. The prophesied hour had come. And so Jesus poured himself into the disciples, showing them love in a gentle, quiet and humble way. He washed their feet, acting as only the lowest of servants would. Jesus showed his disciples, then and now, how we are to live: to serve one another with sacrificial love. The way of Christ is love. Betrayal, denial and self-interest don't matter. Jesus loves his disciples in spite of their faults, fears and failures. He even told them in advance. Jesus' time with the disciples in the upper room follows a divine script so powerful it changed the world forever.

But it wasn't easy. John's gospel tells us “*Jesus was troubled in spirit*” (v21) over Judas' betrayal. It was only when Jesus revealed he was aware of the plot against him that “*Satan entered into Judas*” (v27) and Judas left the table immediately. That was necessary for three reasons: first, Judas had a role to play in Jesus' death. Second, by sending Judas away, Jesus began an irreversible chain of events that would lead to his public shaming, death on a cross, and his resurrection as the glorified Christ. Third, the final act of the divine drama could only happen with those who truly wanted to be right with God.

What was that final act? It happened at the end of the meal, which was a Seder. We call it the Eucharist or communion. John's gospel doesn't tell us the signs and words Jesus used. John is focused on what Jesus did before and after. John 13:34b-35 tells us Jesus gave us a new commandment: “... *love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

Why would Jesus give us a new commandment? What does that mean? To answer those questions, I believe we need to turn to the words Jesus spoke. Luke 22:19-21 records them: “*This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me*” and “*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*” Jesus tells us to remember his sacrifice and what it means. That's the first part of communion. We remember he willingly went to the cross for us.

It’s the second part that’s key. Jesus renews all who come to share at his table through a new covenant. And the first, and most important, rule for participating is to do so out of love for Jesus and for each other. The Lord’s table is a table of love, forgiveness, grace and mercy. There is no judgment, condemnation or shame present. No matter what we have done, who we are or what we feel, anyone who truly wants to know Jesus can come to the table at anytime. It’s a safe place, the safest place in the world. It’s a place where there is no prejudice, hatred, evil or apathy. Those who freely and willingly gather, seeking to be right with God, are received as children, with love and grace.

We gather at the table to be renewed by the love of Jesus. That’s what changed the world, because God’s love did not end at Jesus’ death on the cross or burial. God’s love is so powerful it overcomes death, the forces of darkness and our own doubts and fears. Jesus’ final acts ratified and affirmed the new covenant. His sacrifice and the shedding of his blood cancelled the old covenant and began a new covenant and the relationship we have with Jesus today.

I invite you to come to the table tonight as you are. Acknowledge your fear, admit your faults and embrace your feelings for you are in the presence of God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Be renewed together, loving brothers and sisters in Christ, to God be the glory!

Amen.

Exodus 12:1–10,11–14 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

John 13:31b-35 (NRSV)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”