

## Sermon for Maundy Thursday 2014

What would you do if you knew your life was coming to an end? Would you try to check off everything on your bucket list? Would you want to reconnect with old friends, settle old disputes, say you're sorry for some offense against another some time in the past?

Or would you simply want to be with those whom you love, telling stories, laughing, shedding a few tears, hugging, enjoying the company?

A friend told me of the final weeks of her husband's life. How it was, in a way, a long and beautiful party. He wasn't able to get up and about, but folks who loved him came to him, shared stories, shared food, spent time holding hands, hugging, confessing and rejoicing. A celebration of life while anticipating the end that would come to him, as it comes to us all. There were moments of darkness and moments of life, but his family wouldn't have traded it for anything.

It seems that Jesus' choice at the end of his life was a simple one. A meal like any one of a thousand meals he had shared with his friends, and yet not like any other. Jesus had told them many times that his time with him would be short, and that it would not end well. They didn't want to face that, of course. None of us want to face the loss of one whom we cherish. But he had warned them.

And then there was the surprising entry into Jerusalem, with crowds singing the praises of Jesus. One or two of the disciples may have thought "so much for all that talk of dying young." The dinner – anticipating the passover meal – that they would share seemed celebratory after all the accolades as they entered the city. And yet the host, their beloved rabbi, seemed subdued.

Still, they feasted, remembering the old story of how the Israelite children were passed over by the angel of death while the children of their Egyptian overlords died, because of the mark of the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. A passing over, a saving of God's people, with the enemy vanquished, and lots of food and lots of wine.

But Jesus seemed not to be focused on the Passover story. Instead, he began with a simple gesture, a washing of his disciples' feet. A normal sign of hospitality in that dusty corner of the world, but it was usually done by servants, not the host, because it was a humbling thing, kneeling before someone and addressing their dirty feet. And it made the disciples uncomfortable, but he insisted that this was necessary. He must serve them. He must.

And as the meal progressed, as he told them to remember this meal, these words, remember and repeat them so that they would never forget him, there was a momentary ache, a twinge in their hearts. What was he talking about? Was he back into that business about dying soon, about going away? Didn't he remember the joyous cries of the crowd?

But he insisted. "I am going away soon. I will always love you. Love one another." A dark, plaintive note in his voice as he said it, and they looked down, not wanted the others to see the tears now welling up in their eyes.

Because this was a Passover like no other, because there would be no passing over this son of Israel. This son would die. The Angel of Death would not pass over him and leave him untouched. No, it was his turn, Israel's turn, to lose its first son, the son of God.

The last meal together was full of laughter and stories and good food and wine, but the darkness was gathering. The one who served them by washing their feet would serve them, and us, by offering himself as the sacrificial lamb. A dozen hours later, the lamb would be slaughtered, dead, broken. The jokes and the wine forgotten. The jostling over who sat where around the table no longer important.

But the words and the sacrifice are remembered. We remember them each time we share the sacrament of Holy Eucharist together.

Our service of Holy Eucharist is formal. Sanitized, in a way. Lots of formal language, none of the casual and lively conversation that marks most family-and-friends dinners. None of the spilled lamb juice, the olive pits, the crumbs of flatbread on the cloth. And I fear that we forget the joy and love and worry and emotion of that meal, the humanity of that meal, in our Sunday services.

It was a meal, friends. A meal like any other, and yet like no other. A meal with human beings sitting around the table with the one who taught them and loved them to the end. Messy. Imperfect, emotional. And yet the one we need to remember, in all its beautiful imperfection. Because it was a gift from the one who chose to be the sacrifice, the one who volunteered to not be passed over, to give himself to us and for us.

So as we gather around the table tonight for this meal, this remembrance of that last meal, I pray that we can feel in ourselves all the emotions that dwelled in the hearts of Jesus and his disciples that last night. As we clear the dining table after having been fed, I pray that we can feel the sense of something lost, something remembered, the sacrifice, the darkness ahead, so that we can feel what will follow that darkness.

Eat. Drink. Laugh. Cry. Tell stories. And never, never forget.

Amen.