

A Sermon Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

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(Propers-Year B, Maundy Thursday)

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26)

Tonight is Maundy Thursday, the time during Holy Week when the Giving of a New Commandment is traditionally acknowledged. That new commandment is hardly "new" in content. It states simply that we should love one another. What could be easier? Or looked at from the other side – what could be more difficult? Like all the sayings of Jesus, they tend to be more complicated upon reflection than they were when first imagined; and we are left to ponder the deeper significance and import of their meaning. No easy task.

But take heart. Despite the pervasive and somewhat somber theme in the lectionary readings for this service, I hope to draw out the positive elements that are highlighted in the giving of this new commandment. And I do so mindful that the purpose of any sermon is to proclaim the good news, no matter where the sermon is given, or at whatever time it is delivered during the church year. The calendar, the date, the lessons, and the context – all these may vary somewhat from year to year, but the Gospel remains constant, and the task of the preacher is to proclaim the good news.

Having said that, I now have the unenviable task of demonstrating that I can actually do what I'm talking about: preaching what I practice, as well as practicing what I preach. So here goes.

Let me suggest at the outset that the giving of a new commandment to love one another as Christ loved us is not the only ceremonial aspect of Maundy Thursday. Some churches include the washing of feet in the same way that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The institution of the Lord's Supper is also acknowledged as we heard in the reading from both the Epistle and the Gospel. And in many parishes around the world, Maundy Thursday is the occasion for the Stripping of the Altar, often done by members of the Altar Guild, in such a way that upon completion and removal of all the paraments, linens, candles chalices and patens, we are put in mind of the cold, barren tomb that awaits the body of the crucified Christ.

There are so many symbolic events and practices in Maundy Thursday's liturgy that it is hard to sort everything out, and find the irreducible piece of Good News that justifies the attention the service deserves. The quest for the perfect illustration of how our Christian

faith might be defined, or configured, or simply interpreted, just isn't there. Maundy Thursday is not about proving anything, or convincing anyone of some explicit doctrinal point of view, or positing an unchallenged tenet of faith. Instead, Maundy Thursday is an experience of Christian reverence. It is the time in our religious life that we reflect on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion what his death might mean for our own lives today.

And to that end, we find a clue in the Maundy Thursday Collect for the Day. Listen carefully to the phrasing, and what it emphasizes. "...Jesus Christ our Lord, who in these holy mysteries gives us a pledge of eternal life."

...a pledge of eternal life.

The promise of God is eternal life; not prosperous living, not more accumulation of things and possessions, not more beauty and glamour or good looks – none of those things count. What truly counts is the promise of eternal life.

That is the spirit of our conviction and dedication to Christ. We see him as a man for others, a suffering servant, a wounded healer, and a wonderful counselor. Jesus loves us, unconditionally, and unequivocally. In light of that abundance of faith and belief, as well as being mindful of the pivotal role he plays in our own salvation, we understand that Jesus holds the keys to the kingdom, and his pledge of eternal life is perhaps the most wondrous and precious gift of all.

Maundy Thursday remains crucial to our appreciation and understanding of Holy Week. It sets the stage for the sorrows of tomorrow, Good Friday. It helps us to understand the need for quiet and reflection on Holy Saturday. It forces us to contemplate in a very intentional way the requirement of a Great Vigil of Easter when we can finally loose the bonds of restraint that Lent has imposed upon us – and shout our Alleluias.

By Easter Sunday we will have come full circle, and the promise of eternal life is vindicated. "Christ is risen," and we will echo the triumphant good news – "He is risen indeed." But for now, we pause and reflect. We focus on the new commandment of love, and we celebrate with solemnity the institution of the Last Supper. May this year's Holy Week be a vital time of renewal and the coming of hope into your life.

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.