



“Working the Night Shift”

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Hayward, California***

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Readings from the Passion Narrative***

A friend and colleague of mine, Jerry Wagenknecht, is a big shot health care executive in Chicago. Over the years, he worked his way up from hospital chaplaincy to the corporate office.

Though the pay was significantly better in the corporate office and he was able to buy a nice home in the suburbs and send his children to the best colleges, he once shared with me that he sometimes longed for the job that he had had when he first started with the health system. His first job, Jerry explained, was working the night shift at one of the small community hospitals on the north side of Chicago—a hospital that the parent company had bought out years ago.

“Wow, Jerry,” I said, “what’s to miss: sleepless nights, trauma cases, midnight phone calls to survivors informing them that their loved ones have been killed by drunk drivers, peeling psychotic street people off the ceilings, and comforting frantic parents whose children are sick or injured? Is this what you’re missing?”

“Well, not exactly,” Jerry said. “I miss being close to the people we serve, and the employees who deliver on the mission, values, and philosophy that we espouse as an organization.”

“Tell me more,” I said. Then Jerry went on to tell me this story.

He explained, “One night I was doing my rounds and I stopped by the ER to see how things were going. I had heard over the intercom that the ER was paging docs on their supper break to respond to multiple trauma cases that were being brought in by ambulance.

“When I arrived in the ER I found only the aftermath of the response team’s work in the waiting room, where a janitor was mopping up the floors behind a yellow safety sign.

“Hoping for a briefing on recent events,” Jerry said, “I approached the janitor and asked what was going on in the ER. He looked up politely from his job and he said to me, ‘We’re saving lives here, sir. We’re saving lives.’”

I've never forgotten Jerry's story, because I think that it touched me as much as it touched him. We both knew that it was rare to find a person who was so well grounded in his vocation and the mission of an organization that he could articulate that connection so succinctly and profoundly without any prompting from management.

Jerry went on to explain that he would never forget his conversation with the night janitor, because it exemplified for him his reason for being at the corporate office. His personal mission, Jerry said, was to create and nurture communities of healthcare workers who were infused with a passion for healing and who were grounded in their organization's faith-based mission.

II

Tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we re-enact a story and remember the passion of a person whose vocation and mission, like that night janitor in the Chicago hospital, who reminds us of our reason for being as a Christian community. Tonight we re-enact a story that began in bondage and ends in freedom, and a story that is grounded in suffering that culminates in salvation.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we celebrate tonight, is grounded in the Jewish celebration of Passover. The gospels tell us that when Jesus went to Jerusalem for what would be his last Passover celebration, he gathered with his disciples in an upper room for the Seder.

The Seder was and is a sacred meal in the Jewish tradition that commemorates the Hebrew's Exodus from Egyptian slavery. The narrative moves from Egypt across the Red Sea through the Wilderness of Sinai where the Law was given, and culminates in the Promised Land where Israel is able to experience the fullness of God's liberating word.

Jesus, like other devout Jews of his time, was mindful of the hardships that his ancestors experienced in Egypt some 1,300 years before his birth, and so he gathered around a table with his friends in an upper room to retell this holy history and to celebrate the traditional Passover feast.

As Jesus broke the bread and blessed the cup, he added another layer of meaning to Israel's holy history. He blessed the elements and explained that the Passover meal also commemorated a spiritual liberation from individual and corporate sin and suffering, which was (and is) based on God's grace, and that by participating in this sacred meal they (and we) participated in Christ's new covenant—a covenant based not on the Law, but on love.

That is why we call this night Maundy Thursday. "**Maundy**" means commandment. On the first Maundy Thursday, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment—"that you love one another as I have loved you."

Because we live this side of heaven, the love we attempt to share with each other is not complete. Our very lives bear the marks of individual shortcomings and collective struggles, and of our individual and communal need for healing and liberation.

When we break this bread as Jesus did, we acknowledge our brokenness and our need to be made whole.

As we dip our bread into the common cup—the cup of the new covenant—we remember that God created every one of us in love to love one another, and nothing, nothing in life or death, can ever separate us from God's love.

III

Following the Sacrament of Holy Communion tonight, our service moves on through the passion narrative, from the Upper Room (where Christ supped with his disciples) to the Garden of Gethsemane (where he urged his followers to wait with him just a little while as he prayed). There in the Garden, Jesus was betrayed by Judas, and arrested by a squad of Roman soldiers.

After his arrest, Jesus was taken first to the home of Caiaphas the High Priest, who declared him a heretic, and who sent him on to Pilate, the Roman Governor. Pilate, in turn, washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus' sentence, and permitted mob rule to condemn him to death—death on a cross.

We call this latter part of our worship service the Tenebrae service. "**Tenebrae**" is the Latin term for "shadows." As our liturgists read each of nine passages from the passion narrative, they will extinguish a candle on the communion table and the chapel lights will be dimmed, until finally all except the Christ candle remains lighted.

Through the darkening of the chapel, we recall our individual and collective struggles, and Christ's struggles amidst a world where doubt, denial, and death loomed large, and we dare to remember that the light of Christ flickers in the darkness, and the dark does not overcome it. In fact, in the darkness, the light of Christ shines ever more brightly.

At the end of the service tonight, Natalie Guier will come forward, pick up the Christ candle from the communion table, and lead us out into the night in silence.

As we go our separate ways, let us remember that we worship a God, who is like the hospital employees who I mentioned at the beginning of this message. We worship a God who works the night shift. Like the chaplain, the janitor, and the trauma team, our God is up all night long working to overcome doubt, denial, and despair, so that we might know in our heart of hearts that death is not the end, and that Easter is our final destination. Thanks be to God. Amen.