



“Fools for Christ”

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***Maundy Thursday
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Readings from the Passion Narrative***

Today is April Fool’s Day. Have you been tricked yet today? I haven’t heard of any good practical jokes for a while, but I remember a few from my younger years.

April Fool’s Day was practically a high holy day for us as kids. I remember that finding it hard to study on these days, because we kids were so preoccupied with trying to think up ways to trick each other and our teachers.

Probably the best April Fool’s joke that I can remember was from my college days, when our student newspaper put out an April Fool’s Day issue filled with made up stories about life on campus. The gag was pulled off so effectively that I think there are still people who believe that a helium balloon landed in the middle of our college campus the day before the paper came out.

When I realized some months ago that Maundy Thursday landed on April Fool’s Day this year, I couldn’t resist incorporating the theme into tonight’s service. It’s not lost on me that the people who gathered on the first Maundy Thursday in the upper room with Jesus were considered fools by their contemporaries. They—and especially their leader, Jesus—spoke truth to power. He said and did things that needed to be said and done, and he paid a price for his truth telling—a price that very few were willing to pay.

Similarly, Christians in every time and place who have kept Jesus’ practice of gathering for Maundy Thursday have tasted (to greater or lesser degrees) the challenges of his mission, and they have been seen as fools—fools for Christ.

We are fortunate as modern Christians to live in a time and place where we suffer little for our beliefs and values. Despite that fact, I’m sure that there are many other places that we could be tonight, and that some see us as fools—some may even feel foolish for being here tonight.

We could, after all, be sitting in front of a TV watching college basketball. We could be traveling to some fabulous vacation spot. Or we could just be chillin’ with some friends somewhere that didn’t require any effort to learn special music, learn difficult words to pronounce and read in public, and sit here in increasing darkness contemplating the

hardest parts of Jesus' life and how those segue with our own journeys. So even in the face of our small sacrifices, we and others may think of us as fools—fools for Christ.

Nevertheless, we are here. But why and for what purpose?

II

Tonight we are here to re-enact the Last Supper that Christ celebrated with his first followers, and to read and reflect on his passion and death. Because as Christians we are fundamentally Easter people, even in the darkest moments of this night, we remember and celebrate that suffering is not our purpose, that death is not the end, and that Christ continues to show us—and to be for us—the way, the truth, and the light.

The Last Supper, Holy Communion, as our Confirmands will tell you is one of the two sacraments that we celebrate as Protestant Christians. This sacrament is grounded in the Jewish celebration of Passover.

The gospels tell us that in the final days of his earthly life Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. They gathered in an upper room and participated in a Seder meal, much like our Jewish neighbors will celebrate this Saturday.

The Seder was and is a sacred meal in the Jewish tradition commemorating our ancient Hebrew ancestors Exodus from Egyptian slavery. The narrative undergirding the Seder meal recalls their liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew's crossing of the Red Sea and Wilderness experience where the Law was given to Moses at Sinai, and finally culminating in their arrival in the Promised Land.

Jesus, like other devout Jews of his time, was mindful of the hardships that his ancestors experienced some 1,300 years before his birth, as they gathered around a table. And, he was fully aware of the mission that God had called him to be about. So after supper, he broke the bread and blessed the cup, and added another layer of meaning to his people's holy history.

He explained that the Passover meal not only commemorated an historical event when the Hebrew people were liberated from slavery, but he said that it also commemorated a spiritual liberation from sin and suffering that was open to all people on account of God's grace.

Jesus also said that by participating in this sacred meal, his followers—and ultimately all of us—could participate in a **new covenant**. This new covenant, Jesus said, was not based on the Law, but on God's love.

This is why we call today Maundy Thursday. "**Maundy**" means commandment. On the first Maundy Thursday, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment—"that [we] love one another as [God has] loved [us]."

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 our individual and collective sins of omission and commission, and of our need for healing and liberation.

When we break this bread as Jesus did, we acknowledge our brokenness and our need for wholeness in body, mind and spirit, as a community, and as a world.

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 in order that we might love one another, and we remember that nothing—nothing in life or death—can ever separate us from the love of God.

III

Following the Sacrament of Holy Communion tonight we will move through the passion narrative, traveling literarily from the upper room (where Christ supped with his disciples), to the Garden of Gethsemane (where Jesus urged his followers to wait with him just a little while as he prayed, though they did not. Remember that Peter denied Jesus three times, and that Judas betrayed Jesus to the Roman Army, who arrested and took him prisoner).

The Roman soldiers then took their captor to the home of Caiaphas the High Priest, who declared Jesus a heretic, and who then sent him to Pilate, the Roman Governor, for a second trial. Pilate washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus' fate, 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 the nine passages from the passion narrative, they will extinguish a candle on the communion table and the chapel lights will be dimmed. Finally, all but the Christ candle will be extinguished.

Through the darkening of the chapel, we reflect on our individual and collective struggles, and on Christ's struggles amidst a world where doubt, denial, and death loomed large. But that is not all. We also dare to remember in the depths of the darkness that the light of Christ shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome the night. In fact, it is often in the deepest parts of our respective “nights” that the light of Christ beams most bright.

So hold that thought about the light shining in the deepest part of your night, our night, as Yoshi Rodriguez comes forward, picks up the Christ candle from the communion table, and leads us out into the night in silence.

As we go our separate ways, let us remember, too, that we worship a God, whom the world thought foolish, and who may think of us a fools for being here tonight—for following Christ's path, and for holding out hope in spite as the worst that doubt, death, and despair can do to us. And that the ultimate April Fools joke is on the three “D's” (death,

doubt, and despair), because God who has already overcome all of these, and the victory that we return to celebrate on Easter Sunday is already won. Thanks be to God. Amen.