

Texts: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Theme: Meals: Remembering, Sharing, Finding New Life

Have you ever wondered why sharing meals with other people is so important to us? Since I've been here at New Jerusalem, I've heard several people comment: "*You know, Lutherans just can't get together without eating!*" Of course, I've heard that same comment made about Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others. We human beings seem to have an instinctual need, not just to eat, but to eat in the company of others, whether it's sitting down together as a family on a regular basis or at those special occasional meals like Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, anniversaries. Why is this? I suspect it may derive from a reality we all intuitively understand and have experienced: when we share meals with one another, something important can happen; sometimes we are changed – even transformed!

I was struck by the importance of sharing a common meal this past week when I received a phone call from my brother-in-law Jim, who lives in Washington state. In two weeks, I will fly to Phoenix, Arizona to gather with my two living siblings as well as my deceased brother's three children and his widow. My older brother died somewhat unexpectedly last June. There was no memorial service at that time, and thus, no opportunity to process his death and the complicated relationships he had with all of us. When Jim called me this past Monday, he convincingly suggested that right after whatever kind of memorial service we have at the cemetery, we should all go out for dinner at a restaurant where we can get a private dining room and then talk with one another, sharing memories of my brother. He was concerned that if we go back to the house where most of us will be staying, then the TV would get turned on as well as cell phones and laptop computers – way too much distraction! Jim understands that my brother's children need to hear more about their father's childhood and upbringing, and we siblings need to hear more about my brother's family life with his children. And his widow, a 2nd wife, needs to hear all of this. Jim has a clear and deep understanding of the incipient possibilities inherent in sharing a common meal and sharing stories with others without outside distractions.

This past January we showed a movie called *Silent Night* here at New Jerusalem – it's actually a Christmas movie – and, I think, one of the best "Christmas" movies available. The movie dramatically portrays what can happen when a meal is shared. *Silent Night* is based on a true story that occurred near the end of World War II in Germany on Christmas Eve, 1944. A German mother and her twelve-year-old son seek refuge at a family hunting cabin from the constant bombings of her city. Not long after she arrives at the cabin, three lost American soldiers, one of whom is wounded, approach the house seeking a refuge. She allows these soldiers to find shelter in her home if they will leave their weapons outside; and she offers to fix them a meal. Not long thereafter, however, three German soldiers arrive, and after much resistance the mother manages to convince these soldiers to also lay aside their differences with the enemy soldiers for one night and leave their weapons outside as well. Central to the story is a common meal these enemy forces share. As the woman goes about making a potato soup (potatoes are all she has for food), the soldiers from both sides begin to offer items from their packs. The Germans have brown bread; the Americans have other goodies, including a bottle of wine, and all share what they have. As they eat together, they begin to share stories – stories about their homes, their families, their values. And as the stories are told and food is shared, hostilities between these enemy soldiers decrease.

It wasn't until I had discussed this movie with others that I realized the extent of the **Eucharistic** imagery incorporated into this film: the bread is offered by the Germans; the wine is provided by the Americans. The meal and the stories are shared by all – and something profound happens as mutual understanding begins to emerge between them. The movie reminds me of a verse from the hymn, *I Come with Joy*" (ELW 482, verse 3):

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share, each proud division ends.
That love that made us makes us one, and strangers now are friends,
And strangers now are friends.

All three of our scripture readings for this Maundy Thursday either speak of or take place in the context of a common meal. In the Exodus reading God outlines the instructions for celebrating the Passover meal – that final meal before Pharaoh allows the Israelites to leave Egypt. God instructs the Israelites: "*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*" (Ex. 12:14). The Jewish people have celebrated this Passover meal for millennia, retelling the story. The story reminds them that God acted on their behalf to liberate their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. It reminds them of who they are as a people; and it reminds them that God can make the impossible, possible. In the sharing of the Passover meal and the telling of the story, they rediscover and reconnect with God and their own identity as a people.

In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul passes on what he himself had received – "*that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread*" . . . and "*in the same way took the cup . . .*" This is the oldest account of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, written several years before Matthew, Mark, or Luke wrote their accounts of Jesus' Last Supper. During this meal, Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist, a meal in which he said, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" Jesus knows he will become the Passover Lamb, given for the sake of the world.

In the gospel reading, John sets this as the stage when he writes of Jesus last meal:

"Jesus knew 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."

We are told right up front that what follows is going to be about Jesus' "*loving his own to the end.*"

Back in my choir directing days, I came across a choir anthem¹ that I always wanted to sing, but for which I had a difficult time finding a good place within our liturgical calendar. The piece is a "Christmas" anthem as suggested by some of the text and the melody, which is a lullaby with a somewhat haunting quality to it. You might understand my dilemma given the words:

Child of the manger, child of the cross, All of our gain for all of Your loss.
Bethlehem looks to Golgotha's tree, Born that You might die for me.

Lully, lully, lullay, Lully lullay, my baby.
Lully, lully, lullay, Slumber my child, My Savior.

¹Courtney, Craig, *Child of the Manger, Child of the Cross* (Columbus, Ohio: Beckenhorst Press, Inc. © Copyright 1987).

Is this a Christmas anthem or a Good Friday anthem? In tonight's gospel, Jesus knows that his "hour" has come, that this will be his final meal with his disciples, and that he will die tomorrow. He knows that he who was *the child of the manger will soon become the child of the cross*.

So Jesus does something completely unexpected as he sits down for this final meal. He physically enacts and makes real all that he's been teaching these disciples for the past several years. He gets up from the table, lays aside his outer robe, gets down on his knees and begins to wash the disciples' dirty and dusty feet. It's not at all what the disciples are expecting and their indignation at Jesus' behavior is certainly not surprising – washing feet is the work of servants and slaves, not that of a great teacher or leader. It was an action akin to having a renowned person visit your home for dinner, only to have that person get up, ask for a rag and a can of cleanser, and then proceed to clean your bathroom. So it's not surprising that Peter tries to resist – in fact, he resists twice. But Jesus is providing a living demonstration of what will happen the next day – a precursor of the incredible self-offering that will take place on the cross when he will lay aside not just his outer robe but his very life for the sake of others.

When he has finished washing all their feet (including Peter's), Jesus then asks them: "*Do you know what I have done for you?*" Indeed, do we know what Jesus has done for us? Jesus has just enacted a profound demonstration of what love is all about – to humbly serve others as he has just served them, even unto death. Then Jesus says to those gathered around the table:

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' (Jn 13:34-35).

The story of that final meal as Jesus sat down for supper with his friends has been retold and retold over the centuries. This is the story we remember and tell each year during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday.² Parts of this story we retell every time we break bread together and share the cup of wine around this altar. This story reminds us of the incredible lengths Jesus was willing to go to demonstrate God's love for us. This story reminds us of who we are called to be and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This story reminds us that we are called to love others as he has loved us.

When we tell this story again and again, and share in this meal of bread and wine with one another, we remember. And in remembering we can gain strength for the days ahead. The disciples who gathered with Jesus for his last meal would have a hard time believing as the events of the next few days unfolded – they had not expected the child of the manger to become the child of the cross. Sometimes we may have a hard time believing as well when life gets difficult. Perhaps that's why Jesus instructed them and instructs us: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" When life's situations become difficult, when tragedy strikes, when nothing seems to be going "right," we need to retell the story and remember.

So once again we too join in a common meal, even as did those American and German soldiers on a war-torn Christmas Eve in 1944. We break bread and drink wine together, and we share the story again, remembering that the Child of the Manger has indeed become the Child of the Cross. This is the one who is our Savior and our Redeemer.

²The name "Maundy Thursday" derives from the Latin text for "New Commandment," *Novum Mandatum*, from which the English word "mandate" from *mandatum* is also derived.

**Full Text of the Anthem,
*Child of the Manger, Child of the Cross*³
by Craig Courtney**

Child of the manger, child of the cross,
All of our gain for all of Your loss.
Bethlehem looks to Golgotha's tree,
Born that You might die for me.

Lully, lully lullay,
Lully, lullay, my baby.
Lully, lully, lullay,
Slumber my child, my Savior.

He who created the starts and the sea
now cannot lift his head.
Look at His hands so tiny and soft,
One day they will be pierced at Calvary.

Child of the manger, child of the cross,
All of our gain for all of Your loss.
Bethlehem looks to Golgotha's tree,
Born that You might die for me.

Lully, lully lullay,
Lully, lullay, my baby.
Lully, lully, lullay,
Slumber my child, my Savior.
Hmm . . .

³Courtney, Craig, *Child of the Manger, Child of the Cross* (Columbus, Ohio: Beckenhorst Press, Inc. © Copyright 1987).