

Matthew 4:1-11
Stones to Bread
Holy Thursday March 24th, 2016

Tonight is a night that is rich in tradition in the Christian Church. These traditions vary greatly from congregation to congregation. Some churches this night focus on Jesus washing the feet of his disciples on the night before he died, and they re-enact it.



In full view of all worshipers, a husband might wash the feet of his wife, or a Sunday school teacher may wash the feet of her students. I at such services have washed the feet of all who would come.



It's always awkward, but the message is clear; humility and servanthood are what signify the Christian Church, because they are how Jesus did his ministry.

In another church, the focus of this night might be confession—honest, humble, and contrite confession. And not just confessing sins to God, but also the confessing of our sins to each other.

It is the tradition among some Christians in Africa on Maundy Thursday, or as we call it here Holy Thursday, that before Holy Communion is served, worshipers move about the sanctuary and seek forgiveness from everyone they have hurt or offended or sinned against—known or unknown—in recent months.

It may take a few minutes; it might take an hour; but the service does not continue until every worshiper has been reconciled with every other worshiper. I wonder how that would work in the North American Church. I suspect, if honestly approached it might take a long, long time in most churches.

What all of these traditions have in common, though, is that they draw us near to Jesus on the night before he was crucified, and remind us that his love is the most powerful force this world has ever known.

Their common purpose is not only that we remember Jesus' love, but that we would *know* his love, and that we would *be* his love in this hurting world...that we would *be* his *servants* in this selfish, self-serving world...that we would *personify* his grace in this harsh and unforgiving world.

The name Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin translation of John 13:34-35 "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." These words were spoken by Jesus during the Last Supper.

In Latin, the words "new commandment" are "mandatum novum". "Mandatum" was slurred to Maundy and so we get Maundy Thursday; the Thursday of Jesus' new command. This understanding being remote, we now often just refer to this Thursday of Holy week as Holy Thursday.

The Apostle John wrote Jesus' new commandment down. When the Apostle John was old and dying he was asked to bring one last message to the church. Slowly, haltingly, he stood before the congregation and said in a whisper, "Love one another." Then he was asked if there was anything else he would like to say. "Yes", John replied, "Love one another." When the service had ended, his assistant asked him, "Brother John, why do you continue to repeat this same message?"

John replied, "Because if we would do this only, it would be enough." And that is the message we have come to receive from Jesus tonight: a new commandment that tells us to love. We have heard it. We will see it. We will eat it and drink it. And then we will go from this place and live it, be it.

Each worship service during this Journey of Stones this Lenten season we have carried small stones into worship with us, and at the end of each sermon, we have had them collected and lain at the foot of this cross. It has made a mess, so messy in fact we moved it all out for various events.

Sin is like that: it is messy, it's unattractive, and it leaves its ugly mark upon our lives. That's the nature of sin. You probably can't see from where you are sitting, but the base of that cross is covered by stones: our stones; our sins. They represent our hatred, our gossip, and slander, our pride, our prejudice, our silence, fear and failure. Tonight Jesus, once again, is going to take care of those stones. He will take care of us and our sins.

As Jesus was beginning his public ministry, after his Baptism, he spent 40 days in the Judean wilderness. That is where we get the 40 days of the season of Lent. At the end of that time when he was tired and hungry, the Devil came to Jesus and tempted him.

“If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But Jesus answered and said, “It is written ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’”

Tonight, though, Jesus HAS turned the stones into bread. Tonight, all the ugliness of our selfishness and sin is carried by Jesus. The mess of our sins covers not us, not the Sanctuary floor, they cover Jesus. We are the ones left without spot or blemish.

Tonight, you were NOT handed a stone as you entered; but tonight you will be handed a piece of bread and a promise. **“This is my body, given for you for your sins and the sins of the world.”** And then the stones, our sins, will be gone, transcended, translated by the Bread of Life.

If we are puzzled by how this happens, imagine how puzzled the disciples were on that first Maundy Thursday by Jesus' words and actions. They could not even remotely conceive that Jesus was only 24 hours away from crucifixion. Their thoughts and feelings were with the

crowds of Palm Sunday shouting and celebrating the coming of the Warrior King. They sat at that table with Jesus and argued about who was going to be greatest in Jesus' coming Kingdom.

They could not even conceive that within 24 hours they would not be arguing about who was going to be greatest in Jesus' kingdom, but betraying, denying and abandoning Jesus to a shameful death, the death of a criminal on a cross.

They didn't get it! If Jesus was ever going to withhold his gift of grace, that was the time to do it! If Jesus was ever going to renege on his promise of forgiveness, that would have been it!! But Jesus gave them the gift anyway.

You see, that is one of the great myths of this thing called "Holy Communion"—that **(Myth #1) we have to understand it before we can receive it.** Did the disciples understand what Jesus meant? Do children who receive the sacrament totally understand? Do people with dementia or Alzheimer's understand when our Stephen Ministers serve them?

Do *you* understand perfectly what is happening here having received Holy Communion for 20, 30, 40, even 80 or 90 years? Can you, or even I, truly explain the real presence of Christ as we break the bread and receive the cup? I would say no.

We simply must receive this gift of grace. We simply must believe the promise of Christ that forgiveness and eternal life are ours. We must have faith.

Another great myth about Holy Communion is that **(Myth #2) it's only for the righteous.** Think of what the 12 were about to do that were gathered around that table. Think of Judas who received the bread from Jesus' own hand. If Judas had only accepted Jesus' grace and forgiveness along with the bread, he would have been saved rather than condemned.

The “righteous” don’t need Holy Communion; we do. Only sinners need the gift that Jesus has to offer. John Wesley always spoke of Holy Communion as being a *converting means of grace*. It is a way God touches us to change us.

In a few moments you will be invited to come forward and sit at this table. If you cannot come forward Holy Communion will be brought to you. But you will sit at this table and either the disciple Peter or John will serve you a piece of bread.

You will hold out your hands in the sign of a cross just like you see on the screen and the bread will be placed in your hand.



You may hold a Ph.D., but when you sit at this table your hands will be empty. You may have a stock portfolio in the eight-figure range, but when you sit at this table; your hands will be empty. You may have a famous name, or a glamorous job, or a loving family, or great friends, but when you sit at this table your hands will be empty.

Or you may already know you have nothing and come forward with a dark and evil past. You may be completely empty devoid of all wealth and power; family and friends; filled only with sin, but when you leave you will be filled with the Bread of Life—new life!!! If we receive the gift of grace, so freely offered, we will all leave filled with life.

But when you sit at this table you are empty; and so am I. And the only thing that can fill our need tonight is this Bread—the Bread of life.

I will close with this story: A young woman, who was a first year student at Princeton Theological Seminary, was assigned to do her internship at a local nursing home. Every Wednesday, Janine would read scripture, pray and serve communion to the elderly who would gather.



And every one of the residents would gladly receive this gift of grace of Holy Communion. Everyone would gladly receive but one: Madaline Jacks.

Madaline never said a word to Janine during her visit. In fact, Madaline never said a word to anyone; she had stopped speaking years ago.

But one Wednesday afternoon, something happened. Something very, very special happened. As she did each week, Janine handed the wafer to Madaline, with the words, “The Body of Christ Madaline, broken for you.”

But this week Madaline spoke. Holding the wafer between her thumb and forefinger, she smiled and said, “For me. Madaline Jacks. For me.” And then she ate the Bread of Life.

Friends, tonight when you come forward with your broken hearts, and empty hands and shattered dreams, may you know that Jesus has turned your stones of sin into the bread of life.

For you, tonight, this is the Body of Christ for you.

Tonight when the Bread of Life is given to you, remind yourself of this by replying, “For me!” In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Come, the table of the Lord is spread and ready for you. Turn to page 13 in our hymnals as we consecrate the elements.



Please keep this slide up until all have received Holy Communion.