

MAUNDY THURSDAY | MARCH 28, 2024

EXODUS 12:1-4, 11-14 | PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19 | 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 | John 13:1-17, 31b-35

A few years ago, I ducked into a jewelry store after work to get a new battery installed in Anna's watch. And while the watch was being worked on, I started making small talk with the woman working the register. She was surprised to learn that I was the pastor of the Lutheran church in town. Because she went to an ELCA church a couple miles away. Or, rather, used to go. But the pastor, she told me, was terrible. Awful. She went on to list a number of grievances she and—she assured me—others had. This went on for an uncomfortably long time. But suddenly, she stopped and got a concerned look on her face. "Wait a second," she said, "Do you know them?"

It's interesting to me that what gave her pause was not self-awareness (Maybe I'm being too critical.) or concern for me (I'll try to be extra kind while there's a priest in the store.), it was whether this was someone we all knew. It's almost like someone else knowing this person made them real.

I was reminded of that interaction while preparing for tonight's service. In tonight's gospel reading, Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment. "Just as I have loved you," Jesus says, "you also should love one another." Maundy Thursday actually takes its name from this commandment—"commandment" in Latin being "mandatum." As we begin the great three days at the center of the church's life, we begin by remembering Jesus's instruction that we love one another.

We do love one another. One of the privileges of pastoring a congregation is getting to see the ways that people love, support, and accompany one another through good times and bad. I'm sure many of you have stories you can share along those lines.

And yet, you can see a problem developing in the background, too. Because the people we love tend to be people that we know. After all, when I talk about my "loved ones," I'm referring to my family, friends, colleagues, etc. We're not talking about our neighbor whose name we never learned, the people who are suffering in Israel, Palestine, Haiti, and Ukraine, or the woman picking up food that we donated last week. When someone submits a memorial gift in memory of their loved ones, I have a feeling they don't mean the people who were in front of them at the pharmacy last weekend.

And yet, these are the people that Jesus tells us to love. Not simply those we know and like and feel a sense of belonging to but those we don't know, those we dislike, and those we don't think about at all. The love that Jesus calls us to exhibit in our lives stretches beyond our affinities and interests and experiences.

How can we—people who are often self-interested, cloistered, and forgetful—share the love of Jesus?

St. Paul gives us one answer in today's reading from 1 Corinthians. This is the only story from Jesus's public ministry that Paul tells us about. And it's also the earliest account of the last supper we have in scripture. Ironically, the reason Paul is telling us about the last supper is because

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the people in Corinth are—as always!—having some problems. In particular, their practice of sharing Christ’s meal has become divided. What should be a symbol and reflection of the church’s unity has become a symptom of their division. All the divisions and hierarchies that exist outside the church have been brought inside. The wealthy, the powerful, and the connected have the best food while the poor, marginalized, and forgotten go hungry. All the meal does is reinforce all these habits and norms and relationships that people already have.

So Paul reminds them of how Jesus created this meal. “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you.” Christ’s body is given *for you*. Christ’s body is also given *for them*. And because it’s given for you and for them, it’s given *for us*. Jesus doesn’t just tell us to love people. His death and resurrection create new relationships between us.

Whenever I encounter someone—whether that’s someone new in my life, someone I read about in the news, someone I bump into through an acquaintance, whatever the case may be—and I start to say, “I don’t know them,” Paul interrupts and says, “Well, Jesus knows them. And Jesus knows you. So actually, you do know them. And now you can love them.”

We receive and affirm these relationships whenever we celebrate the Eucharist together. In Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt’s book *The Love That Is God*, this is how he describes it. The church and the Eucharist, he writes is a “a space of face-to-face confrontation with those who, apart from God’s friendship, would be strangers and aliens to us.” Maybe we’d say “encounter” instead of “confrontation,” but you get the idea. There are no strangers and aliens to Christ. And as Christ’s body, there are no strangers and aliens to us, either. Only people who are known and loved by God in Christ. And only people that we don’t know and love *yet*.

Sometimes people ask me what the best way they can get connected to church is. Is there a class? Or a book? Or a program? And the answer is always the same. Participate in worship. Sing the hymns. Join in the prayers. Listen to the sermon. But most important, come to communion. The foundation of our relationship together as church is not that we all like each other or we all think the same things or we all believe the same things. It’s that we are all known and loved by Jesus.

And so everything we do—all we do in our church community, all we do in our neighborhood, all we do in global service—it’s all just catching up to what God does around Christ’s table every week.

The body of Christ given for you, for them, and for us.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor