

Maundy Thursday

Jn 13.1-17, 31b-35

There was once a monastery in England where the monks would practice a rather unusual ritual during their observance of Maundy Thursday. The monastery was the Priory of St. Cuthbert in Durham, which is located about four-and-a-half hours north of London. The Priory was established in the 11th century, about 100 years after a Benedictine monk named Aldwin arrived in Durham, bringing with him the relics of St. Cuthbert. During the 14th century, the monks began making it a habit every year on Maundy Thursday to observe what became known as the Judas cup ceremony.

Toward the very end of the Maundy Thursday service, just before the stripping of the altar, the Prior and the monks would assemble in the chancel of the monastery chapel, where they would be seated around a large table. The Prior would then take a large wooden drinking bowl and place it on the table. Carved into the inside of the bowl was an image of the face of Judas Iscariot. The Prior would pour wine into the bowl and then, speaking on behalf of Jesus, he would say, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.”

All the monks would then respond with the same question the disciples asked Jesus: “Lord, who is it? Is it I?” Then the monks would pass the bowl around the table, each of them taking a drink of the wine. As they drew the bowl close to their faces, they would see the carved face of Judas looking back at them.

After all the monks had drunk from the bowl, they would in silence rise from the table and proceed to strip the altar and the sanctuary of all its appointments. From that point on, the observance of Good Friday had begun.

The Judas cup ceremony fell out of regular use for a while; the Priory of St. Cuthbert was

caught up in the dissolution of the monasteries that took place in England during the 16th century. Hugh Whitehead was the Prior at the time, and after the Priory was dissolved he was appointed the first Dean of Durham Cathedral, and the monks under his care were appointed canons of the cathedral. But the practice of the Judas Cup was revived around 1998 and has since that time been practiced annually at the cathedral in Durham. In fact, today being Maundy Thursday, they would have observed this year's Judas cup ceremony about five hours ago.

The Judas cup ceremony is designed to do several things. It's designed to help those who participate in it to enter more deeply into the observance of the day by putting them at the table with Jesus. In other words, the Judas cup ceremony makes the observance of Maundy Thursday something more than just a remembrance of a past event. It helps to make the observance of Maundy Thursday something that is immediately present, a real-time event instead of just a memorial or an anniversary.

A second thing the Judas cup ceremony does is enable the participants to draw close to one of the more disturbing or uncomfortable aspects of the Maundy Thursday observance. The Judas cup ceremony allows each person to see that not only are they at the table with Jesus, but they are at the table with Jesus precisely as the one who will betray him.

When the Prior speaks on behalf of Jesus and says, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me," and the monks respond, "Lord, is it I?" they're asking a rhetorical question. Of *course* they are the one. They have come to the table having already made plans to betray their Lord; they are there to receive the ministry and the hospitality of the one they are going to hand over to be killed. They are all Judas.

The final and the most important thing the Judas cup ceremony does is invite those who participate in it to reflect on the love and the grace given to them by Jesus. They come to the

table of the Lord ready to betray him—indeed, they have already betrayed him—and yet he still offers them his mercy and his love. They come to the table having already turned their hearts away from him, and he washes their feet and offers them his body and his blood. This is the heart of the ceremony. This is the essential truth that the ceremony communicates: despite their faithlessness to him, Jesus remains faithful to them.

Now, we're not going to have a chance to observe here something like the Judas cup ceremony that they observe at Durham Cathedral, but that doesn't mean we can't glimpse the truth to which this ceremony bears witness. Each of the themes that are at the heart of the Judas cup ceremony can be just as much a part of our observance this night.

Have we come here tonight to recall an event that happened a long time ago in a land far away, or have we come here tonight to participate in a very mysterious but a very real way in that same event? Can we envision ourselves as being present at the table with Jesus? I think we can. I'm going to suggest two ways that will hopefully help us see ourselves as being present with Jesus this night, just as his disciples were present with him in that upper room in Jerusalem.

When Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him, they began to argue with another, and it's not hard to imagine why: they started to accuse one another. Luke's gospel says, "A dispute arose amongst them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest." It was at this point that Jesus got up and began to wash their feet. After he was done, he said to them, "You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am." But, he said, "I am among you as one serves. . . . So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

One of the ways that the presence of Jesus is made real in our midst is through our willingness to be servants to one another. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as saying to his

disciples, “The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve. So whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all.” Mutual service and mutual submission are hallmarks of those who follow Jesus, and when we adopt the same posture that Jesus himself adopted with his disciples—the posture of a servant—then Jesus is present in our midst.

Here’s another way that we can see ourselves as being present at the table with Jesus this night: after he had washed their feet, Jesus ate with his disciples, and it was during that meal that he taught them how they were to remember him. “Take this bread and eat it, for this bread is my body, which is given for you. Take this wine and drink it, for this wine is my blood, which will be poured out for you.”

Jesus takes the familiar images of the Passover meal and he redefines them. No longer would the bread and the wine primarily signify the act of deliverance that God had wrought for Israel when he delivered them from slavery in Egypt: now the bread and the wine would signify the deliverance that God would accomplish through Jesus.

In the simple act of sharing bread and wine together—just as in the simple act of washing one another’s feet—Jesus said that he would continue to be present in the midst of his disciples. In both of these ways, we are present at the table with Jesus here tonight.

Now, if we’re honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we may not be all that anxious to be present with Jesus. Remember the second lesson of the Judas cup ceremony? When they drank from the bowl, each of the monks saw themselves reflected in the face of Judas carved into the bowl. Each of them had to come to grips with the fact that *they* were the one who would betray Jesus; *they* were the one who had already turned their heart from him and had fallen into darkness.

The same is true for us. If we seek to draw near to Jesus by washing one another’s feet

and by sharing a meal of bread and wine, we have to be ready for the possibility that Jesus may show us some things about ourselves that we're not all that anxious to see. We have to be ready to acknowledge the ways we have betrayed the presence of Jesus in our midst, just as the disciples betrayed that presence by disputing amongst themselves. We may even find, much to our own chagrin, that our commemoration of the Lord's Supper has less to do with our devotion to Jesus and more to do with our devotion to ourselves and our vision for how we think things ought to be.

Of course, we may feel that there's no danger of this whatsoever. We'd never betray Jesus, right? We're far too good for that, far too devoted and committed for that to happen. One of his disciples thought that, too: remember Simon Peter? "Lord, even if all the rest of them abandon you, I will not. I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to death!" And he meant it; had you asked him right at that moment if he would die for Jesus, he probably would have. But just hours later, Simon Peter was denying that he even knew Jesus. We must never deceive ourselves about our capacity for betrayal and faithlessness.

Here's where the final and the most important lesson of the Judas cup ceremony becomes so significant: even despite our faithlessness, even while we are in midst of the very act of betraying him, Jesus loves us. He washed the feet of both Simon Peter and of Judas. He broke bread with his disciples knowing that they would all abandon him. He doesn't love us *because* of our faithlessness, but he does love us *in spite of* our faithlessness.

So the question we are forced to ask ourselves tonight is, how will we respond to this kind of love? If we would be his disciples, then we must be obedient to him; we must be obedient to the example he sets, and we must be obedient to the command that he gives us. "I give you a new commandment," he says. "Just as I have loved you, so you ought to love one

another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

We will know that we are his disciples when we are obedient to his command to love another as he has loved us; not to love one another as *we* would love one another, but as *he* loves us. We are to offer one another *his* love, not our own. We will know we are his disciples when we are obedient to his example to serve one another.

And when we know ourselves to be his disciples, we will find he is present in our midst, and we will find ourselves equipped both to serve the world and to proclaim his love to those who have not heard of it.

May we be obedient to his example and may we be obedient to his command this day and always. Amen.

21 April 2019
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC