

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
Maundy Thursday, April 21, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Best Church Supper Ever,
Exodus 12:1–14, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26, John 13:1–17, 31b–35 .

Church suppers are fine events. Usually there is a wide variety of food and lots of it. My mouth waters as I think about the church suppers I have attended over the years. Recipes for the food served are often traded amongst the participants. Often there is a story behind the recipe. My wife, Holly, has a nice collection of such food formulas from the churches we have served. She even seems to remember who gave her the recipe when she pulls one out to use. When she mentions the name, it triggers memories of those church members from across the country we knew so many years ago. As fine an event as church suppers can be, I have come to realize that it is not so much the food served, but the people present who make it a true celebration.

And so it was on that Passover night celebrated by Jesus and his disciples some 2000 years ago. There was plenty of food. The recipe for the Passover meal was well known. Diana read it with us from the passage in Exodus 12. It had been handed down amongst the people of God for some 1200 years before the time of Jesus. It reminded them of God's saving act when they were slaves in Egypt. The angel of death had passed over the homes of those who were faithful and obedient to God. It reminded God's people of their brave ancestors in the faith, and of God's redeeming grace. The Passover or Seder is a meal still served by Jews and some Christians alike today. As vital as the food and drink served at that Passover meal celebrated by Jesus and his disciples some 2000 years ago, even more so were the people present. (I have included more detail on the Passover or Seder meal from the website, "COOKING WITH THE BIBLE" at the end of this sermon for those who want a copy.)

That tradition and history filled meal eaten 2000 years ago was different from all the Passovers celebrated before because of the people present and what they did. Jesus performed a surprise foot washing of his disciple's feet, and he declared a new covenant as described by Paul in I Corinthians. In doing all this, Jesus transformed the long remembered and celebrated Passover event into a person who made it the best church supper ever served. The foot washing and the new covenant, now a part of the Passover meal became living declarations about the personhood of God in Jesus Christ and how Jesus relates to us as persons.

In these declarations, Jesus was in preparation for his own Passover, a Passover from this world to be with God the Father, again. He was getting ready to show the disciples how much he loved them, to the very end. Jesus was preparing for his death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus became the unblemished Passover lamb sacrificed for the sake of all humanity. It was in the shedding of his blood, which ran onto the lintel and post of the cross that the sting of death was overcome by the power of Jesus' never ending love. The Passover was no longer just a long remembered and practiced tradition, but a person. The unending saving love of God behind it was not just something God did in the past, but it was embodied forever in the living Christ, too.

The power of the person of Christ, as the living Passover and never ending love of God was challenged by a person and his never forgotten action. Judas Iscariot was about to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Judas had been seduced by the power of evil to turn Jesus over to the local authorities. Religious and governmental authorities who would falsely convict him of sedition and nail him to the cross making all his teachings, promises and very life look like a waste of time. Jesus knew this would happen. Jesus also knew the rest of the disciples would abandon him and that Peter would deny him. Yet, Jesus broke bread and made the new covenant with all the disciples. Yes, even Judas.

Even more unexpectedly, Jesus washed the feet of all of them, again, including Judas. Jesus lived what he taught. The power of Jesus being the Passover, that redeems humanity, was not halted by the misled heart of one who was about to betray him. If Jesus had not gone ahead and shared the supper with Judas; and if he had not washed his feet, then the Passover meal, and the foot washing would have just been traditions or liturgical acts, not the person of God in Christ. The never ending love of God would have been limited. But, Christ was not stopped and not limited by the person of Judas.

Another person present, Peter, did not catch what was going on when Jesus began washing all those dirty feet. Initially, Peter refused to have his feet washed. But Jesus' response to Peter turned this situation into the person Jesus really was. Foot washing was usually done by a servant, not the master. The servant usually used a basin with water and a towel. In this situation, the master unexpectedly became the servant. Jesus looked Peter in the eye and declared: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." This also may have taken the disciples by surprise. The foot washing was more than an act of cleaning feet. It was Jesus, the master, taking the *role of the servant and in person becoming God's unconditional love or grace to undeserving human beings*. Even the foot washing became who Jesus was and still is. The stoles we wear over our robes today are symbols of that towel Jesus used, and of his servant hood.

In the foot washing, we see Jesus, God's reconciling love first coming to us, looking us in the eye and accepting us just as we are, dirty feet and all. Being God's unconditional love personified, he washes our feet and includes us into the kingdom of God or the fellowship of the towel. Like Peter, some of us might say, "Oh, no, I could not accept such a gift without earning it." Others of us might say, "I cannot let you do this for me God, I am too unworthy. I could never accept something from God." A lot of us find it easier to give than receive. Perhaps we don't think we need our feet washed because we don't want the change it could make in our lives. We may be polite about it, but it is still denying what he has to give us. We become seduced either by the lie that we can do it ourselves or that Christ's sacrificial offering is not enough to redeem us. Do we really think we are the masters of our lives and God isn't? If we see Christ coming to wash our feet and refuse, then we miss the point of it as Peter did. Jesus said, unless we accept his first move toward us and allow him to wash our feet; unless we let him cleanse our sins away in his dying for us, and unless we open up to the pouring out of his never ending love, then, we too, betray him. If we do this, then we also walk away as Judas did from the only person who can reconcile us into the kingdom of God. The foot washing is not just about foot washing. It is about a personal relationship to the person of God in

Jesus Christ who first comes to us and invites us into the fellowship of the towel.

This personal relationship with Jesus is not just about Jesus and me. It is about Jesus, others and me. It is about community. Jesus said to the disciples, "A new commandment I give you, love one another as I have loved you. You see what I have done for you. Now go and do it with one another. Go wash others feet. Copy what I have done. Invite others into the fellowship of the towel." It is from this foot washing and Jesus' command that the "disciples do the same for each other" that we get the name Maundy Thursday. Maundy is from the Latin word for "command." So, what has Jesus done for us that we are also to do for our fellow human beings in this world? We are to bring good news to the poor and afflicted, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and a time of grace from the Lord to all. As we go into all of the world to do this, then others will recognize we are Christ's disciples and that he lives in us. When people see this in us and ask what this is then we can tell them not just about traditions and his history, but about the person of God in Jesus Christ who loves them, you and me forever.

Oh yes, lest we forget, Jesus not only washes our feet, but invites us, as he invited those disciples to sup with him and share in the meal that is his very blood and body given for the forgiveness of our sins. That foot washing and Passover meal had to be the best church supper ever. It is one we can still enjoy today. It is a recipe worth passing on.

THE PREPARATION OF THE SEDER MEAL FROM THE WEBSITE, COOKING WITH THE BIBLE.

Currently, Passover is an eight-day religious holiday (seven days in Israel) that has both historical and agricultural components. The longstanding tradition of recounting and reliving the Passover meal (during the first two nights of the festival) in a ceremonial dinner known as the *Seder* (Hebrew for "order") is found in many versions of the *Haggadah* (a book/guide of "Retelling"), with each Jewish community in Israel and scattered throughout the diaspora celebrating in its own unique way. In some communities, it is forbidden to eat rice and vegetables during Passover; in others, the eating of rice and vegetables is highly celebrated. Regardless, the basic ceremony that accompanies the meal, though particularly formulaic, is nonetheless fluid and has adapted greatly to local needs and customs and, not surprisingly, to what is available at market.

As the Seder meal is notably and purposely symbolic, at the table one will surely find wine (to celebrate and toast God's deliverance and the redemption of God's people); *matzoh* (the bread without yeast, because in the Exodus there was no time to let the bread rise); *maror* (one or more bitter herbs representing the harsh experience of slavery in Egypt); *haroset* (a sweet paste made of fruit, wine, and nuts that recalls the mortar set between the bricks the slaves were forced to make in constructing the buildings of the Egyptians); *karpas* (a green vegetable symbolizing spring or the second chance of a new life); *betzah* (a roasted egg, suggestive of the festival sacrifice); and *zeroah* (a roasted shank bone [or the neck bone of an animal], symbol of the paschal sacrifice and proof that God's command was obeyed). Depending on the community remembrance, there might also be *chazeret* (lettuce to put with the

matzoh in commemoration of Rabbi Hillel's celebration of Passover); *mei melach* (salt water, or some bitter liquid [vinegar, lime juice, lemon juice], to recall the bitter tears of the enslaved Hebrew people and/or the waters that claimed the lives of the Egyptians as the waves of the Sea of Reeds came over them); and *tzafun* ("that which is hidden" is finally redeemed or uncovered, so there is joy and sweetness, i.e., dessert).

It should be noted that the Seder is a twofold meal, beginning with a ritual portion, then completed by serving a full dinner. (Some families do a bit of interweaving, so that the children are more likely to behave and the guests don't faint from hunger.) In many places, there are two separate Seders held on successive days. However, the primary focus is on the symbolic meal and the reading of the ceremony in the *Haggadah*; any recipes used in subsequent dinners have one foot in the symbolic camp, while making adjustments for flavor, abundance, and quality in the culinary camp. In other words, the first meal is to feed one spiritually; the second meal, building on the nature of the first, is meant to please the palates of those present (some say "body *and* soul").