

Every year it is necessary for the Altar Guild and I to *remember again* how we are to *do* this service. It is a service that begins with the familiar...and then takes a sudden, disorienting turn...ending completely unlike any other service.

But not only do we have to remember *how* to do this service again, but every year we are called to rediscover *what* the story that is being told tonight is really about and *why* it matters.

We are telling the story of a particular night in the lives of Jesus and the disciples and so there is a certain “historical” perspective we apply to what happened that night. But it is also impossible to tell it without knowing all that happened *next*--especially, as the story gets remembered in a new light from the perspective of Easter Day. The gospel books themselves are not telling a simple history of tonight--but history as reshaped by the perspective of Jesus’ resurrection. So it is possible to imagine *two different perspectives on that night*: the perspective of the disciples *in that moment in time*--and the perspective of the disciples *looking back* to that night after the experience of Jesus’ resurrection.

I can imagine that the disciples that night felt a nameless *gravity* to their gathering--*a sense of suspense, foreboding, and confusion*. The story as told by John does not actually focus on the *Last Supper* but Jesus *washing the feet* of his disciples--which was quite disorienting to the disciples. And in all the stories, there was of course a discontented betrayer in their midst. And quickly that evening, as they depart to the Mount of Olives for prayer, things begin to violently unravel.

The place in the service where *we may identify with the disciples that night* is our practice of the *Stripping of the Altar* which will follow after Holy Communion tonight. It embodies for us the disciples’ experience of the *unraveling* of everything that night—the disruption of *their* relationship with Jesus...the fracturing of *their* relationships with each other...*their* descent into fear and isolation...and the dissolution of all *their* hopes and dreams. But the Stripping of the Altar may also *mirror back to us moments in our own lives*...when everything dear to us had come unraveled...there was some kind of descent into isolation...and some kind of loss of our dreams. *This too is part of what we may experience with the disciples tonight*.

And yet there is another perspective, looking back on that night, that makes it possible to remember that night differently. And it is embodied in our service tonight by the fact that we do not try to reenact only the Last Supper--but that we do our *full Sunday Eucharist*, interwoven as it is with the consciousness of resurrection and glory in Jesus Christ. *We do not try to pretend tonight that the resurrection has not yet happened—instead, we look back to that night with the eyes of our heart opened by the light of the resurrection*. And when we do--as the gospel writers and Paul did—together we see something else going on that night which could otherwise be easily overlooked.

Curiously—and for good reason—the Church has not called today “Last Supper Day”...but “Maundy Thursday”. This name derives from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning “commandment”—and so today is: “Commandment Thursday”. For it was on this night that not only did Jesus share the Last Supper with his disciples, *but he also gave them a new commandment*, by both his example of serving them in footwashing, but also in his explicit words:

“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.”

What is so easily *overlooked* in the midst of the suspense, foreboding, and confusion of the disciples’ *first* experience of that night, is that Jesus was...still...completely focused...on showing his *love* for them...and calling them to continue thereafter to *love like him*. *And that Jesus was mirroring the love of his Father...and our Father...for those disciples...and for the disciples we are...and for the world*.

Despite the fact that all hell broke loose later that night and in the day to follow, what is more true about those moments was the *persistence of divine love*...truer than the shadows of human betrayal, cruelty, and violence. What was about to happen the next day was not about appeasing an angry God...or God making a blood sacrifice of his Son to satisfy himself. It was about Jesus' continuing obedience to the Father's divine love—despite the rejection of all this by the powers and principalities of that place and time—and the continuing propensity of the world to just keep doing the same thing.

Even in that Maundy Thursday night...as the disciples entered into *the desolation of Jesus*...and this Maundy Thursday night...as we enter into *the disciples' desolation*...none of us are left abandoned there in utter desolation.

There is a greater power at work in the world, that still points toward its full revelation in the future: **the power of divine love...the power of resurrection...the power of forgiveness...the power to make right what has been made wrong...the power that loses nothing of what the world destroyed in Jesus...and that loses nothing of what the world destroys in us.**