

Our Eucharistic Fast

Maundy Thursday 2020

A sermon preached by the Rev. Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin

Maundy Thursday celebrates two practices that we will not be practicing today: One to our great sadness—the Eucharist; and the other to many of our great joy—footwashing. As to footwashing, I know it has not been the habit of St. Mark's in recent history to avail ourselves of this ritual of humble servitude, so for today I will say only two things about it: First, I will call your attention Jesus' uncharacteristically direct instructions from the Gospel of John: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (13:13)—an instruction, some might argue, that is even more direct and unambiguous than his instructions about Eucharist and Baptism. The second thing contains just these words: TWENTY TWENTY-ONE. My dear brothers and sisters, I'm warning you now. You have an entire year to prepare yourself—and your feet—for Holy Week of 2021.

As to the Eucharist, I have a bit more to say. It is a strange time to be a sacramental Christian. The opening pages of The Book of Common Prayer call the Eucharist the principal act of worship in our denomination. But this is not just true for us. The Eucharist has been the central act of Christian worship for almost all Christians for as long as there have been Christians. And for the time being, we are not able to share in that central meal together. What is typically our source of spiritual life and sustenance, what week-by-week ontologically binds us together as the body of Christ, within our current conditions could contribute to our illness and the breaking apart of corporate body, so for the love of the body of Christ we refrain from sharing the body of Christ.

And virtual worship, I will be the first to say admit, is strange. You think it's hard trying to keep both the livestream and the bulletin up on your screen at the same time?... all the while using half your brain power to resist the urge to open another tab just because that's what your brain has been trained to do after years in front of a screen? Try preaching to a camera that doesn't even courtesy laugh at your jokes; who responds to your soaring inspirational monologues with not even the faintest nod of positive affirmation but instead returns only a cold, blank, and ruthless stare. It is strange.

And that is probably how it should feel. Virtual worship is not nothing. And for however long this season of social distancing lasts, I'm grateful that we have it. But it doesn't exactly—how should I say—sate one's appetite. And that's because we are not virtual people. We are real people. We are people of bodies and blood. And what I want to say on this Maundy Thursday—this feast of the body and the blood—is essentially this—it is good and right and holy for us to miss the Eucharist.

Actually, what I want to say is that missing the Eucharist is a shorthand way of summarizing everything that we rightfully miss in these bizarre and trying times that we're living in. Think about what happens on a normal Sunday at St. Mark's. At the core, it gathers together a diverse group of people to eat a meal together. You can't eat virtually, and so the most obvious difference the Eucharist makes compared to what we are living in is it brings our bodies together—and that itself is a source of joy. We are gathered, in a group of more than ten, in

proximity of closer than six feet. We didn't know how much of a gift that was until it has been taken away from us. We are not made to be alone. We are made to live in community. The Eucharist creates community.

But the Eucharist creates a unique kind of community. One that is different than the bowling league or the book club. It invites its members to walk through a particular rhythm of ritual action before it invites our bodies and souls to be fed from the table—a rhythm of Word before Sacrament; a rhythm of gathering, hearing, responding, eating, and being sent back out. All of this is part of a Eucharist.

We gather and are confronted by God's truth in Scripture. And we rightfully respond with prayer and by confessing our sins. We pass the peace to show that having made it through that much of the liturgy, we now stand before God a reconciled people—reconciled both to God and our neighbor. And now reconciled, we make offerings to God, of bread, wine, money; symbolizing our selves, souls, and bodies, not because they're ours to give, but in recognition that God first gave them to us and we owe him everything. God then takes our gifts, transforms them, and offers them back to us as the most precious gift of all—himself. We consume the body of Christ and so are consumed into the body of Christ. This culminating moment can be summarized with one word: communion. We have moved beyond reconciliation to enjoyment. We are in perfect communion with God and with one another. This is everything we yearn for isolated as we are in our households. We long not just to be in community, but to be in reconciled, joyous, community not just with our neighbors but also with God.

This is a picture of a typical Sunday at St. Mark's. It is also a description of heaven. That's what the eucharist is. It is a picture, a preview, of eternity. It is literally what we were made to long for. And so that is the season that is before us now—a season in some ways radically different but in other ways very much the same. It is a season of longing for heavenly communion. So my encouragement to you is to lean in to that longing. Tend it and cherish it. Be not afraid of the valley. Be not afraid of the fast. Because precisely there you may find that God and the Church are still with you. Only know your yearning has opened up space for an even deeper communion than you ever before experienced. This is why we fast in the first place—to open up space to receive back from God his beautiful gifts with renewed intention and beauty.

While we fast from the body of Christ, we do not cease to be the body of Christ. While we wait, Christ waits with us.

amen.