

Maundy Thursday
April 18, 2019
Texts: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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In junior high school, I was “the new kid.” We had just moved to a new house in a new neighborhood, and it seemed like everyone else at my school had known each other since kindergarten... but I was new. And being new, the most awkward, most uncomfortable time of the whole day was lunchtime. And what I dreaded most was the possibility that I might be left to sit and eat my lunch at a table all by myself. It would be a fate worse than death. It would mean to be the outsider, to be invisible; or worse yet, to be outcast, unwanted, rejected. I was tremendously thankful for those friends who reached out to welcome me, who invited me to sit with them. I could have a place at their table.

Tonight, we remember the last evening Jesus spent with his followers—the night in which he was betrayed. We remember the meal they shared together, now Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and said, “This is my body, given for you.” And after supper he took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, “This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you and for all people, for the forgiveness of sins.” And we remember his command that we should do this—share this meal, in remembrance of him. So each and every Sunday, when we gather as the community of Jesus, we share this meal. And especially tonight, the night before Jesus died, we share this meal and receive it as a holy and sacred gift. With this bread and wine, our risen Lord is present to meet us and bless us with his power for healing and wholeness.

And look! There is a place for you at Jesus’ table. This is not the Lutheran table. This is not our own private table. This is Jesus’ table, where he is the host. And Jesus welcomes everyone to his table. Not just the good or successful, or the popular or beautiful, but also the screw-ups, the unlucky, and those who’ve had a hard path through life. Come, eat this bread, drink this wine, and know that Christ receives you as a beloved child of God. Come to the table of mercy, where there are no outcasts, none unwanted, none rejected. This is Jesus’ table, and there is a place for you here. We are all included, and all find our place at this table.

And at this table, we receive something more—something more than inclusion, something more than welcome. Paul hints at it when he says, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

When we share this meal, we are proclaiming the story of Jesus. We are telling the story of the One who died and was raised by God to new life. We're telling the story of God, who in Christ is gathering the whole world into an embrace of love. And as we tell the story, we are also finding our own place in God's story. We are learning how to represent, in our lives, the love of Christ, who makes a place for all at his table.

When Paul wrote the letter that our second reading came from, he was concerned about how the church at Corinth was conducting itself. When the church gathered to celebrate Holy Communion there were some serious problems. Instead of welcome and acceptance, it was a meal that emphasized the differences in the community—who was in and who was out; who was up and who was down. The wealthy members of the church would bring their own food and wine, and they would start eating and drinking before the poor members were able to get off work. By the time the poor arrived, the food and wine were all gone, and those who began early were drunk. They didn't realize that any table where Jesus is the host is different. It is a table where everyone is welcome, everyone is received as a child of God.

So Paul wrote to set things straight: As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. In this meal, you are rehearsing the story of God's great work to heal Creation, to overcome all of the things that produce exclusion and violence, and to gather all to feast and celebrate, reconciled into the presence of God. Paul wants his readers—both then and now—to understand that not only do we discover that we have been welcomed and have a place at the table. Having been welcomed by such love will also change how we live the rest of our lives. It is no longer possible to treat others with indifference when the love of God has taken up residence in our hearts. It is no longer possible to always be about "me first," elbowing our way forward through life, once the love of God begins to change how we see our neighbors and what we recognize is of value.

Once we have found our place at this table, we will be led further and further into Jesus' way of loving and serving. His example of washing feet will guide how we live, how we treat others. When we have seen the world in a way that is shaped by Jesus' compassion and generosity, we will begin to see every neighbor as a child of God, beloved and precious in God's sight. Once we have found our place at Jesus' table, nothing else can ever be the same. Thanks be to God! Amen