

## Maundy Thursday

April 6, 2023

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin

Propers: Exodus 12:1–14a; Psalm 78:14–20, 23–25;

1 Corinthians 11:23–26; John 13:1–16; Psalm 22

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

The infant child is born, takes her first breaths, and begins to cry, announcing her arrival. She must breathe to live. But very soon, another need arises: she is hungry, and so she reaches out, and if she is lucky, she receives food in return, and, so, life begins with its distinctly primal needs—oxygen, touch, intimacy, warmth, and *food*.

Jesus says, we do not “live by bread alone.” He was right about this as he was about so many things. Still, we *must* eat to live. And so much follows from that. In school, we learn about hunter-gatherers and about the folks who figured out farming, and then about trade, competition, city-states, and warfare. And along with all of that comes money, prestige, and power. But in the end, it is also, always, about *food*. If drought persists, kings are in trouble. Just read the Bible.

Because this is true, food and drink have more than one meaning. Food is complicated. Food is always about sustenance and survival, but it is also symbol and memory, and from the very beginning it is relationship: the mother breastfeeds her child; the father gives his son a bottle, holding him so close the infant can hear his father’s beating heart; and then the circle of relationship expands: family, neighbors, friends, and school—which means dinners, picnics, potlucks, parties, and *barbecue*, all of which means community, which gives birth to the rules of hospitality, and, finally, to ritual. We eat to live, but if that were the *only* reason we eat, why would we have ever invented table manners?

Sharing food and drink knits us together and creates bonds of friendship. There are reasons for all those rules. A table can be a holy place, a place

where love is born and nurtured. But not always. A table can also be a battlefield. It is hard to hold a grudge while sharing a meal. But it is hard to eat when you can't let go of the grudge. This problem has inspired many artists to explore the human heart by sitting their characters down around a table and letting them talk to each other. American playwrights of the last century seem to have been particularly expert at this: Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee all wrote works in which domestic settings—the dinner table, the birthday celebration, or the drinks party—become arenas for hurtful words and terrible deeds.<sup>1</sup>

What we see in all these dramas is the human capacity for aggression, the human experience of suffering, and the terrible and symbiotic relationship between the two. Those playwrights show us that aggression is sometimes born of greed or the need to dominate. But sometimes it comes from betrayal, abandonment, cruelties suffered, or from shame. There is almost always shame.

And then there is Jesus. I don't think it can be a coincidence that Jesus prepares for his ministry by *fasting*, confronting his hunger so he can do battle with the enticements of pride and the desire for power (Mark 1:12–13 and parallels). After vanquishing the Evil One, Jesus emerges from the wilderness ready to engage with the human heart and the multiplicity of its ways. And what does he do? He *eats* and he *drinks*. He sits at table with those called “sinner,” with the ostracized, the collaborator, the religious leader, and his less-than-perfect disciples.

Crowds flock to Jesus to listen to his teaching, and maybe, just maybe, to witness a miracle, and what happens? Jesus looks at them, all needy and urgent, and he feels the deepest compassion for all these folks who've sought him out. And what does he do? He *feeds* them (Matthew 9:36–38).

In a scene both heart-wrenching and a little bit funny, Jesus looks up one day and sees a man called Zacchaeus, short of stature, a despised tax

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<sup>1</sup> Consider *Long Day's Journey into Night*; *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

collector, and he says, “Come down from that tree, Zacchaeus, I must stay at your home today” (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus seems to understand instinctively that when we sit down to eat, we bring with us our vulnerability, our joys, our hopes, our shame, our transgressions, our resistance, and, sometimes, deep down, our desire for a new beginning, for healing, for reconciliation, and for *salvation*. And that’s who Jesus is and that’s what Jesus does. He feeds us. He eats with us and seems to be saying something like, “This is God’s Kingdom. This is where you are headed. This is your future. So let it also be your present. Eat and drink. Feel God’s presence, and then go forth to do God’s will.”

The gospel accounts of the Last Supper tell the story of a less-than-perfect meal. This Supper, like all human suppers, is imperfect because the Kingdom of God is not fully realized. At this Supper, in tonight’s gospel passage from the Gospel of John, a betrayer is revealed and the Evil One is an unwelcome guest. There is much light at this Supper. There is hope and there is love. But the darkness cannot be kept out, not entirely: “So, after receiving the piece of bread, Judas immediately went out. And it was night” (John 13:30).

But in this gospel, Jesus is the Light of the World and darkness cannot overcome or defeat him, though it tries. Jesus stays. The Supper continues. In the Gospel of John, he does not say, “This is my Body. This is my Blood.” And yet he feeds his friends with his wisdom, his words, and with the gift of hope. He tells them about his relationship with the Father. He promises to send them a Comforter. He will not abandon them, he says. But remember, this is the same Jesus who once told the people, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), who told them that the “bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (6:33). The Kingdom is not yet. Each day we pray, thy Kingdom come. But, still, the Kingdom insists on breaking in. In Jesus, the Kingdom has come and *still* comes to us, not least in the Bread and the Cup, this simple, earthy matter, primal stuff, bread and wine, food and drink, in which God dwells. In this time of our need, as the sorrow and suffering of Good Friday await us,

Jesus feeds us with the Sacrament of the Kingdom. He comes from the eternal places. He enters time once again and he feeds us. He gives us, imperfect though we are, traces of the Kingdom, food for the journey.

In a few weeks, during Eastertide, we will read and hear the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus, Risen Lord, appears to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. Receiving the gift of their freshly caught fish, Jesus invites them to share breakfast with him. It's not entirely clear to me from the text, but I like to think that Jesus does the cooking. After breakfast, he has a chat with Peter. And the strange and wonderful thing about their conversation is that Jesus, and the evangelist, do not give us the scene our playwrights would have written. There is no bitterness, no recrimination, no banter, no competition, despite all that happened after that Last Supper. Forgiveness is implicit. The conversation is about love. And the love and the forgiveness seem to have been sealed by that shared breakfast of bread and fish. But the scene is not exactly sweet. Something unexpected happens. Jesus, having fed Peter, asks Peter to go and feed all those lost sheep for which Jesus once felt such compassion. It seems that God's Kingdom is not a thing to be hoarded for one's personal use. And this should not surprise us, and I suspect it didn't surprise Peter. This is exactly what Jesus teaches Peter in tonight's gospel. Jesus comes to serve and *not* to be served. Jesus *insists* on washing Peter's feet. God insists on loving us in spite of our sins, our failures, our pride, and our boasting. But love does not mean pity. Jesus does not pity us, though he sees our weakness. Amazingly, he seems to have every confidence that his disciples can do for others what he has done for them. He says, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15). And not many days later the Risen Lord will say to Peter, "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep" (John 21:15–16).

The joyful notes of Maundy Thursday should not mislead us. Maundy Thursday is not a little Easter. During these three sacred days, this Triduum, cross and resurrection are held together. At the conclusion of the Last Supper, Jesus rises and goes out with his disciples to the garden. What

happens next is tomorrow's story, a story that tells us that saying yes to the will of God can be costly. We should not take lightly Jesus' invitation to wash each other's feet. But we must not forget that Jesus has left us traces of the Kingdom. God provides food for the journey, manna in the wilderness, bread and wine, source of solace, and the gift of strength.

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