

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the message tonight, we are deviating a bit. Wandering off and taking the road less traveled, as poet Robert Frost might say.

The weight of emphasis within the Revised Common Lectionary...the expanded listing of biblical readings for the church year...all point to one of the two gospel readings appointed for this day.

And why not? The John reading, found at Chapter 13, Verses 1 - 15, focuses on foot-washing. The name "Maundy Thursday" comes from the Latin word, "Mandatum"...or mandate. A mandate is a commandment...and, in the John reading, Jesus uses the foot washing of the disciples to demonstrate his commandment after the supper of that night: "I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you."

It is a simple command...very difficult to live into, but simple nonetheless...to live in mutual love with each other, especially to the point of humble servanthood...such as washing each other's feet...a theme that seems to be the darling of the moment.

But, when in looking at all the resources I usually examine in preparation for tonight's homily, a gentle, realigning nudging keeps me on the path of Luke's reading instead. "The humility of a very gentle, sustained mutual love among Christians is a worthy theme", I hear, "but not tonight".

Nope. No, instead, I keep hearing the call that I have uttered more than once...discerning the call in my ministry to seek to evaporate the distinction between the sacred and the secular.

OK, for illustration, how many of you have seen this television commercial? A man and woman are sitting and reading or otherwise enjoying a quiet night at home. And, all of the sudden, we hear another voice in the room...from a very large but non-aggressive 800 pound gorilla. The gorilla talks to them, in very measured tones and language. Not threatening at all.. About their need to do some personal financial planning, I think. And, as he continues..and they do not respond but seemingly pretend to ignore him, he says in effect, "OK, go ahead and ignore the fact that there is an 800 pound gorilla in the room." It is not on very often, but have you seen it?

Well, as a faith community, the people of Zion in Rome seem to have a pretty good handle on the mutual love among Christians idea. In listening closely, particularly as our parish vision seems to be moving toward a focused redirection toward the world outside our doors, I believe the Holy Spirit has given us a sense of continuing with a heart-felt mission for compassionate and humble service in our ministries.

However, the 800 pound gorilla still in the room is what I have shared occasionally in the past...the discernment of a call in my ministry to seek to evaporate the distinction between the sacred and the secular. And, the solemn, Maundy Thursday celebration of the Last Supper is a wonderful place to wipe away those distinctions.

Our imagination is a gift from God. Allows us to envision. To dream. To creatively engage ourselves into another reality.

So, tonight, I want you to imagine being present at the meal described in scripture.

On this night, they gather for the Passover meal...the Passover event that they gathered to remember. God had made promises to Moses and his ancient people, and once the Hebrew tribes were finally set free, God asked them to remember the fact that God had rescued and delivered them. So, some 1,500 years later, Jesus and his disciples were preparing to remember the time when God passed over the Hebrew houses. They were preparing to remember God's salvation.

Still, Jesus knew what was coming for him personally. He knew of the momentary betrayal by one of his own. Of the denial by those he loved. Of the coming trial. Of death by torture on the cross.

Still, he loved them until his own end. More than a memorial supper of bread and wine, more than a simple act of thanksgiving, the institution of the Holy Eucharist became a way through which the disciples could recapitulate his final act of self giving love for humankind.

Have we done it so often that we have forgotten how to be shocked by it? But, just as clearly, this is a covenant of indescribable intimacy, a blood covenant we are being asked to enter into, with staggering implications.

The death of Jesus cannot be overlooked, nor should it be. But it is the life...the life from God that is being offered, the life that rushes out to us from the bread and cup. It is God's promise from before time and forever, spelled out this time in flesh and blood. It is the new covenant and the last one: new because it is offered to us fresh each day, and the last one because there is nothing more that God can say or do. This is as close as God can get: blood kin, indissoluble union, friend bound to friend for life, forever.

When we take the bread and lift the cup to our lips, we accept the gift, renewing the covenant and reminding ourselves that we do not live for ourselves alone. We are possessors of a double life, having taken our friend's life and nature into ourselves. Inside of us, God rides in our blood streams straight to our hearts where the covenant is written: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people."

By giving his body and blood, Jesus offered himself in sacrifice for us, and made us part of his own body. He shared our pain, and even in spite of all the suffering that was about to come, he was still able to love us all unconditionally.

The Eucharist causes us to commit ourselves to follow him with all our heart, live according to his commandment and flood this world with his love. The same meal he instituted that night is a continuous reminder that, even not being perfect, we ought to struggle to be worthy of such unconditional love.

So, more than a simple service and a light meal, Maundy Thursday is a calling. We are called to be worthy of such a wondrous love. Called to truly love all humankind, sacrificing our own selfish desires for the common good. Called to go and proclaim the message of Jesus to the outcasts of society. Called to embrace our enemies and to love them with all our heart. Called to love the sick, the hungry and the needy. Called to make a difference, and show to the world what Christ's love is about.

How do we do that? The good Lord knows that I am weak...and frail...and all too human. I know I cannot live into that calling on my own. God does all the heavy lifting. God performs the transformation of our lives. The becoming into the the “people of God” is a process. The process of the resurrection...but that message can wait a few days.

What we need to see, and hear, and recognize tonight...the night before the abandonment, the isolation, the bloody/screaming pain...what we need tonight is to realize that, in approaching his deepest, darkest hour, Jesus still found time. He took the time....to do what?

To share a meal with his loved ones. A meal commemorating a celebration of deliverance from bondage and slavery.

And, as he certainly did at every meal in his journey through life...he gave thanks. Even in the face of certain doom, Jesus gave thanks to God.

Tonight’s meal was only an icon for us. Tomorrow morning, over your breakfast..or just a cup of coffee, begin the transformation of living into new life. Begin...and continue into your day...giving thanks to God. The transformation into the people of God...the beginning of living into the life that God blesses us with...starts with heart-felt acknowledgment that God is in us, and with us, through every moment and every challenge of the day.

Give thanks to God as Jesus did. After all, we are now the body of Christ...and it is left to us to begin to thankfully discern the innumerable ways, throughout our individual lives, that we can rejoice within the presence of God as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.