

Maundy Thursday 2018
March 29, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Tomorrow evening our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate the 1st night of Passover. Some of our Holy Trinity members will be joining family and friends for seder meals over the next few days. How fitting that our first lesson this Maundy Thursday evening is the seder menu set by the Lord in the Book of Exodus.

In order to help our First Communion children and youth understand the Last Supper, the first Lord's Supper, we walked them through a seder meal a couple weeks ago. One of the moms marinated and rotisserie'd lamb, much tastier than the original dish, I'm sure! We had matzoh, unleavened bread, to remember how the children of Israel ate their last meal in the land of slavery **in haste**, leaving no time for bread to rise, and **standing**, sandals on, hiking sticks in hand, ready for the great escape. This is the flat bread our Lord took and blessed and broke, saying the unexpected, unscripted, shocking words, "This is my body, given for you. Do this to remember me." We had grape juice for the children as well, standing in for the wine, the fruit of the vine, which throughout Scripture represents suffering. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sins. Do this to remember me."

As I've said before, and as I think every time I raise the chalice and say those words, "Lord, how could we forget? How could we forget **You**?" But I do. Sometimes I **must** forget that I have a Savior, because if I remembered I certainly wouldn't be as anxious or as concerned as I sometimes honestly feel. Last weekend after I received Holy Communion, the Holy Spirit winged in with this God-thought, and I'm quite sure there was a little smile curling up at the edges of her mouth as she whispered it: "You could be a little more trusting, you know ☺." In other words: "It's not all up to you!"

I remember many things and usually that's a gift. (My aunt used to say I had a memory like an elephant, which I never really understood....) But sometimes I recall what I should let go. As we all know, that can go one of two ways. Either we dwell on the ways others have hurt us and have a hard time **extending** forgiveness – or we bulldog our own sins and can't **accept** forgiveness from other people or from God.

But why did my Jesus die on the cross? "For the forgiveness of sins." Not just the world's sins. **My** sins. So why do I forget that my Lord died for sinners like me not for saints?? Why do I let the memory of my sins stick to me like burrs on a sock? What weird, distorted, misguided, false spiritual pride it is to imagine that my ability to sin is greater than God's ability to save.

After He rose from the dead our Lord Jesus appeared to His closest friends (1 of whom had denied Him, and only 1 of whom **hadn't** abandoned Him) and told them, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them...." (John 20:23) We call that the Office of the Keys, and our Lutheran tradition is that pastors are channels for the spoken Word of grace and forgiveness. So whether you stayed in the pew or came forward to stand or kneel at the rail, I hope these words took root in the rich soil of your soul and instilled confidence, full-of-faith-ness, that in God's eyes your deeply repented sins have vaporized like morning mist:

*In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ,
I forgive you all your sins.*

Not just the ones that you committed out of sheer cluelessness; even the ones that involved conscious malice. Not just the ones like a small rock dropped in a big pond that didn't send much of a ripple toward the shore: even the ones that created a tsunami and wreaked havoc in your own or somebody else's life. Not just the garden-variety, thoughtless sins of childhood: even the creative breaching of the commandments that takes adult-sized intellect, forethought, deceit.

Think about the sin or sins that would most humiliate you if made public to the world-at-large or to the people who love and admire you most. Our Lord took on that humiliation when He washed His friends' feet the night before He died. He willingly, pointedly, took on less-than-slave status to let them know how He would abase Himself on the cross for our sakes. Remember that beautiful hymn from Philippians 2?

*...[T]hough [our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ] was in the form of God,
[he] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Do you remember the detail from last weekend's Passion reading of a young man wrapped only in a sheet who came out to see what was happening as Jesus was arrested? And how he fled when he attracted unwanted attention, leaving behind the sheet in a would-be pursuer's hand and running away naked? Yesterday morning at our 7 a.m. Eucharist we ventured guesses about who that fellow is. We decided he's us. Without the robe of righteousness the Lord Jesus Christ wraps around us, we stand naked and humiliated before our God, a lot like the prodigal son who turned back home back in shame and in hope and received a warm welcome indeed.

It's called "the Great Exchange," Christ's acceptance of our sin and granting us His salvation, His becoming weak so we could become strong, His taking on our sorrow and filling us with joy. St. Paul put it this way: "He who knew no sin became sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). He is **our** Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world, including **our** sins. That is the gift and the mystery we celebrate in these 3 holy days.

Amen. Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham