

Sermon: We must be the unity we pray for
Maundy Thursday, Cycle B
Text: John 17 [High Priestly Prayer]

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I want us to consider context. It is the night of Jesus' most solemn times with his disciples. But *we* are those disciples today. And we have come to our own "upper room" to eat with him.

They had many conversations, throughout the time of his ministry. Undoubtedly they shared other meals with him, also. Strangely, the Gospels give us little to no information about those meals, until we come to this *one* meal, this *one* night, this *last* night, this *last* supper.

So often a preacher asks people to imagine what it was like, *back then*, in Biblical days and times, and to regress, in the mind's eye, as if we were actually invited to that Last Supper and had taken our place at *that* table. An eloquent preacher will paint colorful pictures of that night.

But I am going in the *other* direction tonight. For here, in *this* room, we have invited Jesus our Lord to place himself in *our* midst. *We* are his disciples now, because we are about to do what Jesus *asked* of his disciples when he said, "Do this to remember me."

It is *we* who remember, it is *we* who will lift bread and cup and give thanks and break the bread and pass the cup in order to bring Jesus Christ *forward* into the 21st century.

Tonight is also Passover, Pesach, which is observed this year beginning last night at Sundown and continuing through April 16. Throughout the world, Jewish people are remembering, with sacred and timeless ritual, the rite of passage of their people from slavery into freedom. It was a Passover table where Jesus sat with his friends, and *reinterpreted* the significance of that ancient night in his *own* life. For *we* remember, when we come together, that on that night he said to them, "This is a *new* covenant."

What we are doing in this "upper room" is *forever a new covenant* because we are *always* called, in Jesus Christ, not only to be faithful to the old tradition but to be prepared to follow him into a *new* relationship with God. This is a *new* Passover, in which the wrath of God passes over *all* those who remember the blood shed and the body broken, and in which the friends of Jesus pass from enslavement to everything that has ensnared us to the *freedom of God's new order*.

So what I am saying is, we do not *need* to have a vivid imagination for the way it was in that ancient Upper Room. I do not need to paint a colorful *picture* of disciples crowded around a borrowed table, straining to hear what secrets he was trying to share on this last night. Because *Christ did not remain in that room*, his disciples did not remain in that room, and the movement of all Christians to follow their Lord *did not remain "stuck"* in that era or that spot of geography. From the moment when the path was made clear to him, in prayer; from the moment they led him away in the Garden of Gethsemane; from the moment that he set his foot on the sorrowful way carrying his own cross; from the moment he met Mary in the stillness of the garden even before it was light on the first day of the week: *Jesus has not stopped in place, but has led his people*. His disciples of *every* year and every century have struggled or run to keep up with him, to follow his lead, and to be at his side.

The way is long, but we remember our Lord *best* not by re-creating one hour in time, but by re-remembering the body of Christ: when all the *members* come back together in the name of Jesus, and lift bread and drink from the cup we put his body together again, member by member, connection by connection, joint by joint, bone to bone. *We are Christ's body now*, in the world, running to keep up with him, trying to be at his side.

And *how* Christians do this, and what we mean by tonight's ritual, must also keep up. In *this* room tonight, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Church of Christ have come together to be Christ's body in this place. We come from different strands of

Christian tradition that partly unraveled from one another five centuries ago when the Reformers were shunned by the official, controlling Church of their day. Even though *those Reformers* set off on differing paths, *each* was certain that they were following Jesus' lead. And in many ways, the Christian faith *was enriched* by all these different paths as Reformers set out, guided by their consciences and by the Holy Spirit.

But it is the *21st Century*. And for more than 100 years now, Christians of *all* strands and stripes have been in closer dialogue with one another, *as if* we are all gathered in the *same room*, straining to listen to one another, to hear not only the other voices in the room, but *to hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to discern the voice of Jesus*.

In his new commandment, this night, Jesus set a requirement which most Christians have miserably *failed* to keep for centuries: that we *love one another*. And in his prayer, this night, he prayed fervently that his disciples remain *one*, as intimately as Jesus was one with the Father. Another sad and miserable failure.

And then he said, "I do not pray for these *only*, but also for those who will believe in me because of their word, that they may *also* be one." [John 17:20] Dear friends, ***we are those people***. *We* are those who believe in him *now*, in this 21st century, because of *their word*. And we still struggle to love one another, and to be one, because other witnesses allowed Christian unity to somehow slip through their fingers. The Church of Jesus Christ is sadly fractured. Is it any wonder that opinion poll after poll finds that people out there admire Jesus but despise his followers? During Lent, we have had great opportunity to confess our sins. And then we come to *this* holy night, and are painfully reminded that there is *yet one more sin* that probably none of us gave much thought to during Lent ~ that *we have allowed our unity in Christ to slip away*, time and again.

This is not the first time. Scholars tell us that this evocative wording in John's Gospel reveals that early Christians were not all of the same mind, either. Some thought Jesus was only a prophet sent from God, or a godly man. Those whose faith was reflected in this Gospel were certain that Jesus was God, that he was the very essence and word of God living in the world. And so this passage begs all believers who hear these words to *be one, to be of one mind that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is the Word Incarnate*, that those who see Jesus are seeing the Living God..

I am completely convinced that the Lord of the Church is with us now, in our times, tonight, and whenever we re-member his sacred body by coming back together. And ***I am completely convinced*** that the Lord is calling 21st century Christians to come back together, in a way that has not seemed possible for many centuries between then and now. But if the Lord is with us, and *we are his disciples today*—and no matter how heroic or dedicated were the apostles, saints and martyrs of other times, we are the *only* disciples of Christ living now. The buck stops *here*. We must be those disciples who bring his message of peace and love and reconciliation to the *only* world that *exists*: our world. We are called. We are charged to *love one another*. He is praying for us, that what we do now, we continue to do—remain one. And he is praying not only for us, but for all who come after us and will believe in Jesus Christ because of our word and our witness and our faithfulness.

It is time for us, and for all Christians today, to say to one another and to our elected church leaders and overseers and bishops and patriarchs and matriarchs in Christ today, *we must continue to follow Jesus* on the same road, leading in the *same* direction, running to catch up, struggling to be *in unity with all who love him* and hear his word and lift this bread and cup and rejoice in God's reconciling work through Jesus Christ.

We will *not save* our Christian tradition by protecting it in a museum case. And *we will not do Christ's mission* in the world by savoring our differences or our distinctiveness from different strands of Christian history. We must press on with the righteous work he gave us, as *this holy food*

strengthens us for the road ahead, and the prayer of Jesus rings in our ears as surely as if he were standing here in this room tonight: Love one another. Remain one—as intimately as Jesus and the Father are one, and as surely as we, and those who will come to believe in him because of our word, are one.

We will eat and drink to his death, because in the breaking of his body and the pouring out of his blood Jesus Christ opened the way for all who believe in him to put that body together everywhere in the world and to be the living witness as we can be to God's reconciling work today. Amen?

