

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 13:1-17,31b-35

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 116:1, 10-17

1 Cor. 11:23-26

April 9, 2020

Maundy Thursday

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This evening, as we continue on our journey of Holy Week, I invite you into a time of quiet contemplation. If we were together, our sanctuary would be candle lit, we would wash one another's feet, we would kneel to pray. And, we would gather around table to receive communion together. Our table would be full with the companionship of friends and family and neighbors, a place where everyone is welcome. We would bring all that we are...the tired, the worried, the sick, the joyful, the gracious. As I would look out, I might see tears, gentle smiles, maybe some bobbing heads after a long days work. But our table would most certainly be full.

As I read our scriptures for this evening, the image that kept coming to my mind was the full table that the disciples shared as they broke bread together and as Jesus cared for them. I also imagine that as the evening ended, after all of the words had been said, that there was an emptiness that gradually filled the room as the last disciple prepared to leave. The last disciple, sitting at an empty table before blowing out the candles and returning home.

For most of us tonight, our tables may feel rather empty as well. And that is where I want us to focus this Maundy Thursday...on the empty table. Because, there is honesty in the emptiness. Let me explain what I mean.

As joyful as the crowded table of communion can be, it can also be a source of fear and anxiety for many. We worry – Am I good enough? Will I be accepted? Does God really love me? Am I worthy to share this table and this meal? Is anyone going to judge me? Maybe you have felt that way...inadequate or unworthy.

I think that coming to our table is a blessing but I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge that it can also be very complicated for some of you. Coming to the table of the Lord strips away our pretense. It takes in all that is good within us and also takes in all that is not so good about us. The altar rail that we kneel in front of brings us all literally to our knees, in front of God to humbly say, Here I am, Lord. Will you take me just the way I am?

But, coming humbly just as we are can be so very hard especially if anyone in the church has ever told you that you didn't belong. So tonight, we are going to strip away the crowds from the table (and since that's already been done for us, my job is much easier). Tonight, the table is empty.

What did that empty table feel like for that last disciple? What did it feel like if it were Judas, knowing he would soon betray Jesus and so he sat alone with his guilt? What did it feel like if it were Simon Peter begging to have more and more of Jesus, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" and then as he sat alone he deeply missed his teacher and friend? What

did it feel like for the disciple who may have been confused? What did it feel like for the disciple who may have been angry at what he was about to lose?

Sitting alone, our hearts are exposed.

What if you were the last one at the table that night? When you finally have a moment to sit alone with God and yourself? There is no one to judge you. No one to impress. No one to put on a good face for. There is just you and God.

Now, I want you to close your eyes for a moment. Imagine what your empty table looks like. Maybe the chairs are skewed from those who have already left. Maybe there are still crumbs on the table or wine in the glasses. Maybe the candles are burning down. Now imagine what is on your heart. What does the emptiness expose?

What needs forgiveness? What needs acceptance? What needs strength and courage? What needs more faith? What needs love?

Take time to sit at this empty table and recognize who you are, what you need. What would you pray for in this moment?

Some of you will feel joy and wholeness at this quiet time with God. Reveling in time to pray and be and listen. This table will feel good and life-giving. You may find that you are a lot like Peter, just wanting more time with Jesus.

Others may see the Judas part of our hearts when we sit alone, when there is nothing around us to cover up what needs to be exposed. Some of us will need to wrestle with decisions we have made, people we have hurt, things we have left undone. The empty table might be scary because it makes us look deeply at things we may not want to see.

Whatever you bring to the table tonight as you sit quietly in your home, I want you to remember that as the last disciple left (whichever one it was), the words that rang in his ears were these, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Just as I have loved you. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves the parts of you that you want to hide. Jesus loves the parts of you that have been hurt and damaged and rejected. Jesus loves the parts of you that are scared to be at this table.

I love to tell the story of what made me an Episcopalian. It was the night I went to St. Stephen's Church in Richmond for the first time. I had never been into an Episcopal Church before. It was the Celtic Service. The sanctuary was quiet and candle lit. I knelt to prayer for the first time ever and I heard these words as I was invited to the table...

This is the table, not of the Church, but of the Lord. It is made ready for those who love him and for those who want to love him more. So, come, you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often and you who have not been here long, you who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, because it is the Lord who invites you. It is his will that those who want him should meet him here.

Amen.