



## Living the Legacy of Maundy Thursday

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**W**hat if the church counted *stations in Jesus's life*, beyond the fourteen stations of the cross? Maundy Thursday would surely be one of them. On that evening Jesus washes the disciples' feet, gives a new love commandment, and offers his own body to the world in his Last Supper. This is to this day a living legacy, an indispensable way station among Christian pilgrimage stops through the world, a way to compose a Christian life.

In the imitation of Christ to which we are called, foot washing could be the yoga of Christian discipleship, forming through regular practice and physical confirmation the Christian's appropriate posture in the world. Love, and justice as the social form of love, could mark our pilgrimage. The Eucharist would be a regular way station where the church meets Christ and is shaped into a godly community extending the Incarnation across the world. All this is the legacy of Maundy Thursday.

We are called to practice an obedient discipleship that reflects God's love with a place at the table for everyone, reflecting Jesus's "commensality." Many churches offer a eucharistic liturgy every Sunday, with the Maundy Thursday service in Holy Week the mother of them all. The Common Lectionary readings appointed for Maundy Thursday are Matthew 26:26–30, Mark 14:22–25, and Luke

*What does it mean to eat and drink with our Lord in the Communion meal? Perhaps looking at the first such meal of Jesus with his disciples, and the events surrounding that sacred evening, could expand our ideas of what it means to commune with God and with each other.*

22:14–23. In some liturgies the rather long Passion narratives are read in their entirety as the text of the sacred drama of Holy Week. In John 13–17, Jesus’s “Farewell Discourses” are unique and extensive, but John 6:22–71, following the feeding of the five thousand, already offers a lengthy discourse on Jesus as the very bread of life, the *bread from heaven*. Only in John 13:1–20 is there a story about Jesus washing the disciples’ feet before the Last Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul offers a commentary on how Communion should be celebrated when the church comes together.

As we reflect on this station in our pilgrimage through the world, we might begin asking whether foot washing, practiced in many churches as a holy *ordinance*, might be construed as a kind of Christian yoga in which Christians practice their posture in the world until kneeling in service comes naturally. Imagine the president of the United States kneeling to wash the feet of the poor just before his or her inaugural banquet. It would not need to be a Christian ordinance, but an unmistakable model of servanthood as the essence of political office. (Everyone would get it.) The pope indeed annually washes feet, including of women and the poor and some non-Christians in particular, to model for the church throughout the world its servant-calling. This is a good place to make the point, much needed in a time when religious sentimentality fails to kneel before a gritty world, that in John’s Gospel, Jesus gives a new “love command” and that *the social form of love is justice*.

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The larger setting for the Last Supper, even across the history of religions, is the significance of community meals and their susceptibility to larger referents or metaphors, such as a *commensality* authorized and modeled by God. In this case, the interpretive anchor for the Last Supper is surely Jesus’s own life (and death) and its accumulating way stations, including certainly Jesus’s eating and drinking practices with their implication of inclusion and forgiveness, that had gone before this last eating and drinking. The *fellowship of the table* carries heavy weight across entire social and religious systems. There’s a clue to who you are in whom you invite to your table. Ultimately, this meal anticipates a great messianic banquet to which the world is invited and from which no one is excluded. Jesus means to perform an efficacious sign, a prophetic symbolic act.

To call the Last Supper *symbolic* does not mean that “This is my body” is not substantively real, but that this offering of Jesus’s own self is now *the depth dimension of everything real, of every eating and drinking*. Every bread, already requested

especially for the poor in the Lord's Prayer, partakes of the eucharistic body of Christ—though who remembers?! Ultimately, Jesus's impending death does not end the fellowship of this meal but gives it a new basis and an ultimate authorization. Jesus's identification with the bread and wine is not merely parabolic, but a real and efficacious action in which he gives himself to humankind, inviting and bringing all those far from God into a living fellowship with God, celebrated at this table. In this fellowship the reign of God arrives and comes true. The motif of self-offering for many in early Christianity led to the *teaching* of early Christianity (*lex orandi lex credendi—the law of worship becomes the law of belief and confession*). If we get this meal straight, with all Jesus's intentions, then we will get our theology straight.

But we might pause here to lament the “wafer watch” practiced by some bishops and pastors who want to use non-admission to the Eucharist to underline their favorite sins—or to identify their favorite, often politically driven enemies. Some church bodies, ranging from Anabaptists to some Lutherans, restrict their celebration to *closed Communion*. The Anabaptist tradition wants the meal to mimic their own, local, closely held community. Missouri Synod Lutherans believe they have the true and unique doctrine of the real presence of Christ and use closed Communion to exclude all who are not in strict doctrinal fellowship with them. They pride themselves on protecting outsiders from “eating and drinking to their own damnation” because they fail to discern the body, though Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 11 means precisely the opposite. His point is that those who employ the meal in a divisive manner, not practicing commensality, are the very ones who fail to “discern the body,” which is to say the entire community for whom God set out a welcome mat. Pope Francis has recently reminded the politically conservative American bishops that the Eucharist is a gift of grace, not a reward for good morals or a prize for the perfect.

Almost all who walk these stations of discipleship will have practiced Maundy Thursday, from foot washing to eucharistic eating and drinking which the church has celebrated in obedience to Jesus's invitation and command. So, the Last Supper as eucharistic celebration has evolved throughout the history of Christianity, even as it also shares dimensions of religious piety with other religions, certainly including Judaism's Passover celebrations.

Of course, one can file up the aisle, or wait for wafers to be passed around, while hardly meditating on what we are doing, just as one can thoughtlessly pray the Lord's Prayer. All those who pause to reflect at this station will have much to think and pray and talk about, especially if the presence of the poor, the hungry, and the excluded lies close to mind. Eating and drinking have always been opportunities to bring together the spiritual and the material and to practice and enjoy life together.

In the modern secular world, eating and drinking are central to occasions of celebration and community. A surprising element of the ministry of Jesus, rarely practiced by his followers, was eating and drinking with “sinners” and outcasts. Imagine a new US president celebrating his or her inauguration as a feast for the

homeless on the National Mall. Jesus's persistent flying in the face of religious opposition, tradition, and custom amounted to acts of resistance and simultaneously acts of inclusion. He was staging a different kind of earthly life, anticipating a banquet served to all. He was mixing the yeast of radical theater into the everyday life of the world. Do we?

He took everyday substances, bread and wine, fully identified with them, and made them signs of all things given by God and offered back to God and served up to humanity. He amazed everyone by comingling his death and resurrection with the bread and wine of the human condition. The meal we call the Eucharist was the beginning of the church's wager that Jesus's ministry was going to be the ultimate shape of human life, the venture that earthly existence could be offered up to God at the same time that it was celebrating human togetherness. Everything is redeemable; everything can be saturated with grace; everything can bring God and humans together as table companions; every meal can be a sign of hope and inclusion to the world, every Sunday an opportunity for shoppers at Bloomingdale's and Walmart to bump into each other on the way to the altar. The Eucharist will be the meal that celebrates a liberating God.

During and after New Testament times, common meals became the sites of dramatic experimentation and innovation regarding social roles and relationships, challenging expectations regarding gender, class, and status. Are modern disciples staging revolutionary meals as they pilgrimage in the tracks of the New Testament? Jesus himself had profoundly disturbed the status quo in his own eating and drinking practice. *Christianity came into existence at table.* Early churches continued the meal traditions of Jesus. This swirl of experimentation surrounded the early Christian assemblies, with their "love feasts" and "suppers of the Lord." Christianity was not able to sustain this vision because it forgot the evocative setting on the ground of Jesus's earthly ministry and the experimental setting of early Christian worship. The church at first was good at practicing this meal in order to re-present the life and death of Christ. But liturgical practice eventually changed as theories of Christ's atonement changed, so that the *Eucharist shifted from a feast of life to a reenactment of the killing of Jesus.*

Over the ages, *the Eucharist was transformed from a celebration hosted by a self-giving God to a private dinner hosted by a conservative church.* The church lost sight of the very body of Christ constituted by Jesus's deliberate presence among the marginalized. The Eucharist was turned into a meal where the church fed itself spiritually and even aggrandized its own authority and priestly power (bouncers controlling who gets in), while forgetting the shape of Christ in the life of the world waiting to be fed. Eventually, the open-ended form of Christ, permeating every earthly boundary, was carefully narrowed to the form of the church. In a sorry sequence, the Eucharist began as a soup supper, then became the sacramental presence of Christ, and then the soup itself was withdrawn. But when it is healthy, Christianity is a meal fellowship still. *To preach in Christian worship is to interpret the Word in light of the table.*

When thinking of the Eucharist while walking the stations of Jesus's life, try to keep remembering all those in this country and abroad who have never been invited to any banquet, on whose backs our feasts grow lavish, from whose tables we have snatched our food, in whose faces our banquet hall bespeaks its closed privileges. But the one thing clergy are explicitly licensed to do is be servants, serving the Word as food and the supper as food, in the name of a church which is a meal community. "To minister" is to set out food. The Son of Man came not to be served at the table but to serve the table. Their words and service are edible. Eating and drinking are radical celebrations when they foretell the fall of all existing domination systems erected to exclude the poor. At table, the early communities came to understand the presence of the risen Lord, the greater one who serves the food.

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The much-prayed and much-ignored petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us today our daily bread," perhaps really means "Give us today the bread of the new age." Or "Give the poor the food God has promised." The next petition, "Forgive us our trespasses," might once have spoken to *debt relief or debt forgiveness*, one of the most radical ideas in the Old Testament. To celebrate the Eucharist thoughtfully and with moral discernment is to draw an arc whose full degree touches down on a new earth, whither a heaven descends. If already a joyous meal, it's really an antipasto, leaving us hungry for the final repast. So, in every celebration, the early church cried out in anticipation, "*Maranatha! Come, Lord!*" When I was a participant-observer in the 1970s California Jesus Movement, I witnessed the same thing.

So the Old Testament roots, the Passover meal underlying the Christian Eucharist, can be revelatory to all who look closely. The unmistakable context is Israel's exodus from Egypt, the new covenant, and the restoration of the people of God. Forgiveness of sins is another way of communicating the end of exile and a new exodus, since exile means distance from God and exodus means deliverance from captivity and return to the reign of God. Forgiveness can also be seen as a return to family status. Think of the excluded people Jesus was willing to eat and drink with, and the church's contemporary assignments become clear.

Just before this Last Supper, Jesus had challenged a Jerusalem temple life that disadvantaged the access of the poor to the designated place where God would be

found. Now Jesus seems to be offering himself as a new temple where God meets people. In Jesus's ministry, in his fresh appearance in Jerusalem, and now in this Last Supper, Jesus is redrawing the boundaries of true religion—not inside a hallowed building but within the body of Christ himself.

Jesus identifies the Passover elements with his own body and blood to be offered at the inauguration of a new covenant. Early Christianity's repetition of this meal, and the church's weekly practice ever since, recapitulates this momentous event in the ongoing life of the community. All of it is to be seen within the larger story of Yahweh's redemption of Israel, but now Christians are to keep rehearsing it, keep bringing it to life again, keep *returning this play to the stage—as a light to the entire world as audience*. Celebrating this meal and all it means becomes the vocation of the new community that evidences the reign of God. In this meal is conveyed exile and return, lost humanity and a new covenant, the actual redeeming presence of Christ. Still today, Christ keeps touching down and God's intentions are displayed.

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We pilgrims who gather at this station reflect on all the way stations that have gone before. And on the final two still to come—death and resurrection. All these stations together become the determinative site—which is to say, a re-enchanted earth—where God comes among us. So this table, now named an altar, carries heavy weight.

I have said above that every bread is a eucharistic bread, every eating can be imagined as a eucharistic eating, every table—waiting to be expanded—is a eucharistic table. In every moment of life, Christ is giving himself to us. So the every-Sunday Eucharist becomes a practice for the continuing sacramentalizing, or consecrating, of the world. Everything is waiting to be made holy. All persons are waiting to have the image of God recognized in them. Maybe this really is hocus pocus! The ancient Greek word *anamnesis*, from the early Christian liturgies on, means much more than “remembrance.” It means “re-presentation.” While only Catholics practice the adoration of the host, and they may err in the direction of re-sacrificing Christ rather than celebrating his presence, Protestants could perhaps imagine that the adoration of the host is a recognition of the presence of Christ across the world. We move across the world, “kneeling where prayer has been valid,” as T. S. Eliot has it. Now the host may be displayed in a monstrance, an artistic and stylized display, to get us started. But ultimately, the host should be displayed as the church, an extension of the Incarnation, comes together with the world.

In his hymn, “Victim Divine, Thy Grace We Claim,” Charles Wesley has us sing:

We need not now go up to Heaven,  
To bring the long sought Saviour down;  
Thou art to all already given,  
Thou dost e’en now Thy banquet crown:  
To every faithful soul appear,  
And show Thy real presence here!

In many monasteries, monks eat their meals in silence while up on the wall, depictions of Jesus at the Last Supper speak loudly—most famously in Leonardo DaVinci’s *Last Supper* painting in a Dominican convent in Milan, Italy. If you are making eucharistic art out of your own community practice, be sure you make it a diverse banquet, ranging from the classics of Europe to contemporary art, including from the Global South.

When you return from the embellishments of great hymns and art, and anticipate your next liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, think of Augustine’s evocative words, often repeated at Sunday services: “Behold what you are; become what you receive.” ⊕

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