

Today is Maundy Thursday—Holy Thursday. And before we get to our text, let's remember what this day is about. On Maundy Thursday, we remember Jesus gathering with His Twelve Disciples for the Passover. He washes His Disciples' feet. He institutes the Lord's Supper. He prays the High Priestly Prayer. He takes Peter, James, and John to the Garden of Gethsemane. He is betrayed.

The word *Maundy* comes from the Latin word for *order, mission, command, or mandate*. Maundy is not Monday—that wouldn't make any sense. It comes from the words of Jesus in the Upper Room Discourse from John 13, "A new *commandment* I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

Jesus gives them this new instruction. Now, it may not sound so new. We find commands to love our neighbors—and even our enemies—as early as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—and even all the way back in Leviticus 19 in the Mosaic Law.

What's new about this commandment is the context. Love for us looks like the life of Christ. It looks like the death of Christ. Love is not some sticky-sweet, all-affirming tolerance. Sometimes Jesus is flipping over tables. He laments over the hard-hearted people of Jerusalem. He exposes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. But always for their good—for an opportunity for redemption. Love is tough. It rejoices in the truth. And love is sacrificial. It seeks the good of others—even when they can't distinguish good and evil for themselves.

In John 15, on the same night, Jesus really clarifies this new command, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." Love is an expression of what Jesus accomplishes on the cross. And love is walking in His commands.

In a similar way, the Lord's Supper—that Jesus institutes this same night—is also an expression of what Jesus accomplishes on the cross. There is a line we often forget from Paul about the Lord's Supper—although we will include this line in our liturgy this Sunday. In 1 Corinthians 11, as part of his compilation of the words of institution, Paul says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

We believe in the true presence of Christ in the Sacrament. The Sacrament makes present to us the whole person of Jesus Christ—He who was crucified for us. So, the Sacrament is not merely a symbol, or a metaphor, or a memorial. The Sacrament is Christ. It is the Word of God in bread and wine. And it serves to proclaim to us—and to the world—His body and His blood given in sacrifice. It is a New Testament—a New Covenant in His blood.

And so, the Sacrament and the cross should be very connected ideas for us. We draw near to the cross at the Lord's Supper. And the solemn circumstances under which Jesus instituted His Supper should bring about serious reflection and quiet thankfulness in us.

We are grateful that He comes to us still. And we are grateful for the forgiveness of sins conferred through the blood shed for us on the cross. The Sacrament is an enacted proclamation of the death which it makes present. The Sacrament preaches—week after

week—Christ crucified for us. And so, the cross should be on our minds—it should be before our eyes—when we commune.

This should build a very strong connection for us between Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We really need both of these days. Don't pick one or the other. And in the same way, we should build a very strong connection between the Sacrament and the Gospel.

These things belong together. And it is with this thought that I decided to deal with the final word from Jesus from the cross today, rather than tomorrow. We will do something of a review of all of these words on Good Friday. And we will get into how Jesus speaks about His own cross—especially before it happens.

But in our text today—and for the rest of the sermon—I will really let the text take the lead. The cross is revealed here as a unique and fundamental moment. And it happens right in the middle of everything.

And God gives cosmic signs to awaken the world to its significance. We find Jerusalem in total darkness from noon to three in the afternoon. It is unexplainable apart from God's intervention. And He intends this to be a sign in the heavens—while reminding us to think of the Tabernacle and Temple.

It is an end-of-the-world kind of moment. Think of the predictions of the Prophet Joel, even as they recount the manner in which God was present at Sinai. He says, “And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”

The curtain in the temple was also torn in two. This is the inner curtain separating the holy place from the holiest place. And of course, this signifies Christ forging a new connection between heaven and earth with Himself as the Mediator. Christ reconciles God the Father with humanity as never before.

But Luke wants us to see the darkness and the tearing of the curtain together. This curtain was decorated with the heavens—the sun, moon, stars, and even cherubim—heavenly beings. The whole universe was being torn apart at the death of God's Son. Darkness. Signs in the heavens. Matthew reports an earthquake. And then he also reports that dead saints coming out of their tombs. This was no ordinary moment. Jesus' death is no ordinary death. And we are left to ask, how does the world not see it? Both then and now?

These signs are important. But our focus is still on His words. In Jesus' first words on the cross, He was praying for His persecutors. He completes His suffering with prayer as well. At the end, the final words from Jesus come from Luke's Gospel—although John hints at them—John says, “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

But in Luke, we hear Jesus vocalize this giving up of His Spirit. Luke tells us, “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”

Jesus commends His spirit into the Father's care. Remember, He told the Disciples in John 10, “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I

lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.”

Here, He entrusts the Father with the shelter of His eternal soul. It is a good place to be. And these words come from Psalm 31. And they are worth hearing in context. I really like this Psalm.

“In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me! For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.”

Clearly, this is what Jesus is doing. And yet, there is guidance for us here as well. We too are called to take refuge in the Lord. We need His deliverance—the very deliverance He is working at the moment Jesus prays this Psalm. And there is no better place—really no other place—that we can commit our spirits—and find rest for our souls.

And so, as Jesus breathes His last—at least until Sunday—we are left to come to grips with what all this means. And here at the cross, there are two reactions worth noting.

First, we find the reaction of the crowd—the same crowd that called out for His crucifixion. And the outcome leaves them hopeless—even though they achieved their purposes. They instantly know that this was a horrible decision.

When we get away with sin, it doesn't bring the satisfaction that we think. This includes the so-called small sins—lust, fits of anger, hostility, quarreling, selfish ambition, criticism. And this is the nature of hell. It is getting the sin that we really, really want—and finding it doesn't satisfy. This is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And this is infinitely true when they slay the Son of God.

Remember what Judas does following His betrayal. And now, the crowds have brought hell into their own hearts. Guilt is a bitter pill to swallow. Luke tells us, “And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts.” They are in turmoil—even though they were following their hearts.

But, in verse 47, we get the reaction from one of the soldiers who crucified Him—a centurion. Now, we might want to defend him, saying he was just doing his job. He may have thought Jesus was just another criminal.

But of all days, this is the day to get it right. Centurions were present during the trial. He could have been there for Jesus' conversation with Pilate. Regardless, life and death are serious issues. And sometimes you just have to refuse to do your job. Get fired. Get yourself executed, if need be. Oppose the empire when it slays the Son of God. There is sin in his actions this day—even if he doesn't fully understand what he is doing.

But when all is said and done—after listening to all that Jesus said from the Scriptures—after seeing the way in which Jesus gave up His life—the man believes. He recognizes Jesus' innocence. He sees the travesty of justice. And yet, He sees the hand of God at work as well. It doesn't look like salvation. But that is exactly what it is.

Luke tells us, “Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’” I am sure there was also regret in his praise. And yet, maybe there was hope for grace as well. In Matthew, we find that he also said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

And with these words, the centurion believed. He placed his spirit into the hands of the Father. We sometimes find faith in unlikely places. We find grace in unlikely places. We find it at the cross. We find it in the church. We find it in bread and wine.

And so, as we commune today, on Maundy Thursday, we prepare our hearts. We place our spirits into the hands of the Father. We open ourselves to the grace of our crucified Lord. We approach in repentance—even for those so-called small sins—lust, fits of anger, hostility, quarreling, selfish ambition, criticism. We are done with them today.

And we approach in faith—faith in what Christ did on the cross—and faith in what He is still doing in the Sacrament. Maundy Thursday is all about Christ. Good Friday is too. And we see the connection. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*