

Every so often I have people ask me about the name of this festival in the church year. — what does Maundy Thursday mean? Most often they understood what happened on this day, but they did not know what the word “Maundy” meant. The word “Maundy” comes from a Latin word meaning to command or mandate. On that Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus gave His followers some new commands. And that is why this day received the name Maundy Thursday. We are gathered here this evening to remember what those commands were which Jesus gave to His disciples, and through them, to each one of us. After Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet, He told them that they were not to seek to be lords over one another, but they were to serve one another. In connection with that, He also gave them the command to love one another. In addition to those commands, Jesus also gave a command when HE ESTABLISHED A NEW COVENANT. First of all, I. He fulfilled the Passover meal, then II. He instituted a new meal for His followers.

On that first Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus gathered with His disciples for the purpose of celebrating the Passover meal. This was by the command of God Himself, for He wanted His children to remember what He had done to rescue them from their slavery in Egypt. Pharaoh had refused to let God’s people go, so God told them to take a perfect, spotless lamb, one year old, and sacrifice it. Taking its blood, they were to smear it on the posts of the door. Then they were to go into that house and eat all of the meat, without breaking any of the bones. During that night, God sent the angel of death into Egypt, who killed the firstborn in every home that did not have blood on the doorposts. However, when there was blood on the doorposts, the angel would pass over that house, and no one inside would die.

The entire Passover meal was also to be symbolic, pointing their eyes forward to the true Lamb of God Who would save them eternally from their slavery to sin. Jesus was that spotless, Passover Lamb of God Who would rescue them from death through His own blood. Not one of His bones would be broken either. Everything was to point to what Jesus would be doing for them, not just what God had done for them in the past.

As they gathered to eat this meal, Jesus said to His disciples, **“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”** (15-16) Jesus was eager to eat this meal with His disciples, probably for several reasons. First of all, He knew all that was going to happen that night, how near it was for this portion of His work to begin. So He eagerly desired to eat this meal with them because He knew that the work of taking away all of their sins was about to be completed, and He was eagerly anticipating that. Another reason might well have been because He knew that during this meal He would give them something new to carry them on after His suffering and death.

Then He said that He would not eat it again with them until it found fulfillment in the kingdom of God. Everything that this meal was to mean to them, He was about to fulfill through His own suffering and death. They would then be able to sit with Him at the eternal feast which is another picture of heaven. So Jesus was eager to eat this Passover meal with them.

Throughout the OT period, the Lord commanded the children of Israel to observe the Passover meal. Along with the Passover meal was the obligation for the oldest child to ask the head of the household what all of this meant. Then the father would explain to the whole family everything which God had done for them by saving them from slavery in Egypt. This was to be a constant reminder to them of what the true Passover lamb was going to do for them. This was to be repeated year after year, so that the people would not forget what God had done, and would do for them. We need that constant reminder because we have the tendency to forget things which we do not use frequently. Also, through this celebration, the Lord was reminding them of how they were unable to help themselves, but needed Him to step in to take away all of their sins.

But now Jesus was about to fulfill all of this. So He instituted a new meal for His followers. Using the elements found on the Passover table, Jesus gave the command to celebrate a new meal, one which no longer looked forward to what was going to happen, but one which looked back on what had already taken place. We are familiar with the words of Jesus used in this new meal. As He gave the bread, He said that it was His body given for us. And the cup was the new covenant in His blood, which is poured out for us. These words are powerful and effective because they come from the mouth of our almighty Redeemer. We repeat the words of institution before receiving this new meal which Jesus established for us, not because they are a magical formula, but because through these words Jesus does accomplish that which they say.

Jesus tells us that His body and His blood are really and truly present along with the bread and wine. We receive the bread and wine in a natural, physical way, but the body and blood, in a supernatural, miraculous way. Yet they are truly present because Jesus said so. We observe this meal, first of all, because Jesus commanded that we do it: **“Do this in remembrance of me.”** As we celebrate this sacrament, we do remember exactly what Jesus did for us. He gave His body into death, He shed His blood for each one of us. We hear that comfort pronounced individually to us as we receive His body and blood along with the bread and wine.

Yet, this meal is not just a symbol reminding us of what Jesus has done for us, for in this sacrament, we receive exactly what the words state, the forgiveness of sins, and along with that life and salvation. As we hear that our sins are taken away in this sacrament, our faith reaches out to receive these blessings, and so is strengthened. This is important for us in our daily struggle against sin. We need to know that Jesus does forgive us and that our faith is strengthened day by day.

Jesus calls this a new covenant, because we could not keep the old covenant. The old one was given by God on Mount Sinai. According to that covenant, God would bless and prosper us only as long we kept His commands. It had duties and obligations on both sides. The trouble was, we continually broke that covenant through our rebellious sinfulness.

So God promised a new covenant, one which would not make demands upon us. This new covenant was one in which God binds Himself to do something for us, no matter what our response is. That is why He sent His Son into this world, to lay down His life to take away all of our sins. Unilaterally, He accomplished everything necessary to wipe away all of our sins. Now He offers that forgiveness to us freely. It becomes ours through faith. Then, to strengthen that faith, Jesus even instituted this sacrament so that we could be so sure that our sins were forgiven that we could even taste that forgiveness as we received His body and blood along with the bread and wine. He invites us to come, and to come as often as we feel we need to hear that He has given His body and blood to take away all of our sins. He does not set down any guidelines as to how frequently that should be. On the other hand, though, if one does not partake at all, He is despising Jesus' gift and not following His command.

So on this Maundy Thursday evening, we are again reminded that Jesus has fulfilled God's new covenant with us by laying down His body and blood to take away all of our sins. To help us keep that tremendous gift before our eyes, and to strengthen our faith in Him as we receive forgiveness, He commands us to celebrate the Lord's Supper. This command is not to be considered a burdensome chore, but rather joyous opportunity to receive the personal assurance that He gave His body and blood to wash away our sin. Therefore we gladly and willingly come before His altar often to hear Him tell us individually that He gave His body and blood for me. That is the new covenant Jesus has made with us.