

# Meaning Making

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-14; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

## Slide 1: Notre Dame

This week when in the heart of Paris, the ancient and beautiful Notre Dame Cathedral burned, I watched with absolute sadness and horror as the steeple came down while flames burst through the ancient, wooden ceiling more than 800 years old. I've been there to Notre Dame. I've sung there with a choir. I have experienced the awe, the mystic wonder and the history imbued within that historic church.

One might wonder why Notre Dame received so much media coverage and why Facebook exploded with sadness about the burning of an icon when we so rarely hear about the famine in Yemen or flooding in Malawi in comparison. Notre Dame is a building. People dying of hunger, they are more than a

building. And yet, thousands of people stood outside that beautiful place of pilgrimage and sang hymns. They prayed. Let me tell you, most of them don't practice Christianity, so why would it matter? It mattered because along the way, people were making meaning about that icon of stone and wood, and that meaning granted to that piece of architecture along the many centuries was strong.

Just ask anyone whose house burns down and they lose everything. At first, they have gratitude that all were safe – after all, those things that were lost were just things. But, anyone who has lost everything in flood or fire will, after that sense of gratitude, have to grapple with the immense loss – the loss of having made meaning to the sense of place and some of the things that bring about remembrance.

Yes, they are things, and really, most things are just things, but when

meaning is placed upon them, it changes. People place meaning, history and memory in the places they live, in the rituals they do, and in remembering regularly from where they came.

## **Slide 2: Foot Washing**

And, now here we are, yet again on Maundy Thursday. The Lenten journey spent, we enter the story of our Lord's final days, the supper with his friends, the washing of feet as an example of service, his betrayal, his trial, and his death. We enter in celebration, we leave in silence. There is no blessing given to us until Easter Sunday, no reminder that God brings us life and extends benediction to us – for these short three days, we remember, even if briefly, that we were allowed to kill God.

How do we apply meaning to all this? What do we do in making meaning to the holy mystery that Christ died? Well, like we all have

traditions and rituals for our daily lives, we do the same here with the rituals of the church and these rituals go way back, some to the time of Jesus, but others in the early first centuries.

So, this year I was curious about how people attribute meaning to Holy Week and in particular to the rituals and symbols of the church. This week, when contemplating this sermon for today/tonight, I asked several people the following question: "What about Holy Week are you curious?"

It was clear that I could teach an entire course on rituals and why we do them. And, to be fair, I myself had not known the meaning behind many of the rituals the church does until Seminary, but the important thing was, I had along the way attached a great deal of meaning to them on my own even though I didn't know why we did them. That meaning became applied to the story of Christ along the way in belief and practice.

To me, that is significant. Making meaning in our lives feeds our faith. Even if we didn't know the reason why the Apostle's Creed is said at a baptism, the repetition of it each time we do a Baptism leads us to apply meaning to it. It's likely we would notice if it suddenly were gone. The more we practice something, the more we embody it.

### **Slide 3: Passover Meal**

The creator of all things knows just how powerful ritual and remembrance is for the creation God made. That is why God gave the Israelites the Passover meal to do every year to remember. And, they had specific rules for how to eat it. Why? Some Jews today may not know why, but it's still meaningful because of the doing of it, which then attaches them to the very God who redeems them.

The same can be said for Holy Communion, for the washing of feet, for the

singing of hymns and the sermon. We may not always know why we do them the way we do, but in the doing of it, we attach meaning. And that in turn enhances and sustains our intimate relationship with God.

### **Slide 4: Good Friday**

Hands down, when asking people this week about Holy Week, there was a keen desire to know more about the Stripping of the Altar. It was a primary subject. Clearly it already seemed to be a powerful ritual for each person I asked, but they wondered more about why we did it as part of a worship service. And, as the people of Paris sang hymns uncertain of why it meant so much to them that even secular people and non-Christians sang together and prayed, we too, come to this ritual of Stripping the Altar, not always knowing why we attach meaning to it, but that we do. By doing this every year, we are meaning making the death of Jesus.

Therefore, allow me to add just a bit more meaning to this ancient ritual. Our Altar Care ministers help us with this meaning as well. Every year, the women and men who serve on our Altar Care, carefully and ritually remove from the Altar of all its garments, its adornments, and its ornamentations at the end of Holy Thursday. When everything is removed, what is left is a stark reality, that for a time, although brief, our God was dead.

((Skipped for the 7:00PM!) Although you who are at this midday service will not participate in the stripping of the Altar as it is called, you can appreciate its impact.)

These dedicated people who strip the altar bare every year do so with diligence, care, and practice. They have really applied a great deal of meaning to it. In fact, they had a practice last night in advance so that it would be meaningful. And this ritual, sometimes lost on us as to why it's done, still

for some reason has the effect upon us that it intends – we don't always know why – and yet, it does. That is because we do it every year – it is knit into our Holy Week.

### **Slide 5: Basin and cloth**

And every year at the stripping of the Altar, I think of our Lord Jesus, who on the night when he was betrayed, took off his own tunic, tied a towel around his waist, and washed his disciple's feet. He undressed himself not unlike the undressing of the Altar, for service. That service was to give his life for the sake of others.

Later, during his trial, we hear that Jesus also was "stripped" for death on a cross. The altar we strip each Maundy Thursday stands for Jesus, who on the night of his death, had everything taken away, removed from him, stark, naked, and ultimately dead. This, stripping, too, was for the sake of service, service to the world.

And, not unlike Jesus, who came to know loss as we do, the stripping of the Altar also represents those losses for which we ourselves experience. Sometimes, this undressing represents our own failures, our own losses in life. Sometimes, we are stripped bare, to the point that the only response we can muster is silence, too.

#### **Slide 6: Pouring water on feet**

And, yet, let me attach a bit more meaning of what Christ teaches us in this Holy Week. What Maundy Thursday and Good Friday offer is not an escape from loss but instead to learn a better way of losing. Holy Week teaches us how to learn to lose, how losing is a piece of what life is about. For, at each step to Golgotha, Jesus teaches us that the way to lose is to serve. In each of his losses, Jesus chose to continue to love even his oppressors and those who betrayed him.

- He washed the feet of those who would deny him.
- He gave a final meal to his friends who would later flee out of fear
- He begged God to forgive those who crucified him.
- He gave his mother the support she needed when he was on the cross
- And he showed love and promise to the criminal who was crucified next to him.

As Jesus is stripped bare from everything he knew and loved, he responded to his loss with service, with love, and with vulnerability. This is important for us, that we follow similarly in the way that Jesus responds to loss because often when we experience loss, we lose our ability to think and act beyond ourselves.

#### **Slide 7: palm and cross**

So, Holy Week is meaning in the making, teaching us service even and especially when loss occurs,

so that when a church does  
burn down or a loved one  
grows ill and dies, we will  
be able to grasp the practices  
we do, building us up to  
live, serve and love.

But, remember, the  
cross is not the end. The  
Stripping of the Altar has a  
temporary grasp upon us.  
And, we know this not  
because of some Easter  
platitudes, not because some  
pastor says it has meaning,  
and not because we desire to  
be happy and skip all that  
hard stuff.

We remember that the  
cross is not the end because  
we walk the way of it. We  
walk the way of the cross,  
knowing that when we do,  
in the ways we have found  
meaning while walking it,  
and in the ways we have  
learned to live with loss  
through it, the path to the  
cross always, always leads  
us to the same place every  
time:

- to an empty tomb.

Amen.