

Sermon, Maundy Thursday, St. David's Episcopal Church, Luke 22:14-30 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Normally on Maundy Thursday, we focus on Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. This year, with the pandemic, we aren't able to do this. When proofreading the bulletin last Monday, I kept thinking, wait, this can't be right: until the end, without the footwashing, this service looks like just an ordinary Eucharist.

But is the Eucharist ever ordinary?

The first Eucharist was on the first Maundy Thursday. That first Eucharist took place right before Jesus was arrested. That first Eucharist is one of only two sacraments of the church. We have five other sacramental rites, but Baptism and Eucharist are the biblical sacraments of Jesus that we continue to observe today.

Normally we have a reading from John's gospel that talks about the footwashing. John's gospel is the only one that mentions Jesus washing his disciples' feet. This year, since we can't touch each other because of COVID, I asked the bishop for permission to use one of the older readings for this service from our prayer book. Tonight's reading from Luke gives us what we call the four-fold movement of the Eucharist, that is, taking the bread. Blessing it. Breaking it. Giving it. Take. Bless. Break. Give.

We do this movement in church every time we celebrate communion. This sacrament has a lot of rules. It has to have a clergy person, unlike morning or evening prayer. One of the weirder rules is that during the Eucharistic prayer, we can only have one chalice on the altar. We can have a flagon—that is, a container or wine that we can pour in more chalices after the eucharistic prayer is over, but only one chalice at a time. Another rule is that clergy are supposed to take communion first, which doesn't seem very hospitable, but a previous bishop—not Bishop Susan—once told me that people smarter than I am made up these rules and I had to follow them.

But despite my inferior intelligence, I've had to, let's say, *stretch* some of these rules during the pandemic. Because we need individual sealed servings, instead of one chalice and flagon we have a bunch of teeny prepacked little chalices, but I figured that's OK because they are mostly hidden in a basket. And here at St. David's, instead of me consuming communion first and everyone fumbling with the sacrament when you come up, we have all been partaking at the same time.

The pandemic has shown me that I value the Eucharist more than I realized. In March 2020, when I declared that I was not going to take the Eucharist again until we regathered for in-person worship so that you all could take it too, I thought the church shutdown would last for a couple of weeks. I had no idea that it would be months before St. David's could open again and that during that time I would be diagnosed with lung cancer and undergo a serious surgery removing a chunk of my lung. Fasting from Eucharist for more than a month before that surgery, as well as before my first two cycles of chemo, was excruciating. I imagine being forced to fast from communion was wrenching for most of you as well.

But you know what was the most helpful to me? From my hospital room, watching my husband, whom I hadn't seen for a week, lead a sermon with virtual assistance from a then six-year-old named Nora. The two of them blessed bread, not in a church-sanctioned way, but in a way that made me cry. I ate that bread as soon as I got home from the hospital.

One of the most blessed celebrations of communion I ever attended also was not a church-sanctioned Eucharist. I was a first-year seminary student, and like other first-year students, was not yet an official intern at a church. In subsequent years, we would spend Holy Week and Easter at our field education placement, but that first year we all kind of faltered around figuring out where to observe Holy Week while we pined for our home churches and the way they did things.

On Good Friday, some of us gathered for an informal service that I think was in the communal room of one of the dorms. Most of us sat on the floor, and it was kind of a wake for Jesus. Different people spoke as if he had just died. We prayed and a few cried. And then one person took some bread, prayed, broke it, and passed it around, as she said she had seen Jesus do the night before. We all ate that bread. None of us was ordained. It wasn't Official Eucharist. But I think about that night and that service a lot, all of those earnest seminarians sharing bread.

In the past on Maundy Thursday here at St. David's we have usually shared an agape meal, sometimes in this room as part of the service and sometimes in the parish hall before the Maundy Thursday service. That's not an Official Eucharist, but it is a sacred communal meal that means so much to many and makes me remember how surprised I was when I first came to St. David's by how much everyone here valued their time eating together. I used to get annoyed that when we had evening programs preceded by a meal, I had to go drag people away from the tables in the parish hall and into this space. That's why we eventually switched around the Lenten program so that now we have a service first and then eat, and then if we have a program people can just keep on shoveling food into their mouths at their table while I turn on the projector and start talking. I know better now that to try to tear you guys away from a table.

I guess I'm trying to say that my views on Eucharist and meals and whatever it was Jesus was doing that first night continue to change over the years. Two years ago, I would not have dreamed that we would have Maundy Thursday here without an agape meal first, yet here we are. Last year, I couldn't believe that we would have a Maundy Thursday service without a Eucharist, but we did. A year ago I would not have believed that the 2021 service would have fewer than twenty people and that we would use individual prepackaged cups and forgo a footwashing.

Regardless of all the changes, the most important elements are here tonight. Some of us are gathered in person, just like Jesus was gathered with some of his closest followers that night. We are going to share Eucharist, like they did that night.

And then we will watch this sacred space stripped.

Tomorrow, Good Friday, you can worship at home using Stations of the Cross that have been prepared for us by children and youth in the parish. On Holy Saturday, Sheri Blume will lead us

in a service on Facebook Live. On Sunday, we will gather in this space again and celebrate the most glorious event in the church year.

But first, we have to journey through the next few days. Even as we recall devastating times, we can trust that we are always in God's hands.