

Maundy Thursday 2020

Three things I want to pause and reflect on this evening:

First, the trajectory of the Bible reading and our current circumstances.

Second, thoughts about communion tonight.

Third, our abilities, what we do.

These are first, a lament; second, conundrum and lament, but also good news; and third, lament met by and altered by good news.

To start, the shape of this reading from Matthew moves from communal gathering and gathered community toward scattered isolation at the end. I apologize for that. I lament it. You have too much separated and alone these days. You may long to gather at a communal table and be able to laugh and talk and pass the peas or the basket of bread or the bottle of wine. Instead we are struggling so faithfully to stay apart and avoid contact.

We trust that eventually our story will move in the other direction; we will come together again. But for now, I wish this Gospel didn't lead toward and reinforcing the distance. You have plenty of hardness, so you sure don't need additional manufactured sorrow from the story. I don't want to make it worse.



Second, communion. Clearly this night is important for this. We regularly hear Words of Institution, of this night when Jesus instituted this meal.

I'll be eager to hear about how it was for you, because I don't know what's happening out there. Something communal of communion is missing.

Wanting and needing the Lord's Supper, and having it make so much sense tonight, ELCA clergy have still been hugely debating what to do. It's another of the many things we're all trying to figure out in these days and to do right. It comes with conundrums.

One small conundrum is whether you'd have available what you needed at home, bread and grapey liquid.

Maybe more, the fullness of this meal is discerned as church, the Body of Christ together, as congregated community. As we're separated, people have debated if we're still community enough across the internet (and I come down with those who say Yes).

What about my role? The reason I'm called a minister is because in ministering to your needs, I administer this relief, this antidote of this sacrament. If we would find it less risky to take communion at home than a prescription-filled syringe, we might ask how much we overvalue medicine and discount this cure and care from God.

In evaluating online capability, Lutherans weigh these balances in a difficult middle. For Roman Catholics, for example, a main emphasis is on the priest offering a sacrifice to God on behalf of the people, and it doesn't totally matter whether they receive communion and it's fine to watch. It's mainly something the priest does. For our siblings in the UCC, it's something the people do, remembering we are connected in Jesus. Thinking about that while dispersed serves the purpose of recognizing community, and it can be done with crackers and water as much as bread and wine, I guess.

I don't want to overstate my sense of differences, but for us what happens at this table is mostly something Jesus does. Our basic Lutheran understanding is that Jesus means what he says. It isn't any special powers I have. It's not just a symbol we gather around. Jesus takes bread and says, "This is my body." He takes the cup and

says, “This is my blood. It is for you.” We believe him, without needing to explain exactly how. Jesus promises he is here as you eat and drink this meal. God is everywhere anyway—in outer space and our hearts and lungs and little leaves. But God in Jesus promises especially to be here for you in a good way, for forgiveness and life, in bread and wine. That’s why we do it.

So if you watch the video of this service later, could you repeat communion? Could you replay the Words of Institution multiple times a day? I’d say, if you’re finding the assurance from Jesus, the promise of his life with and in you, that seems good to me. Neither do I personally worry much about consecration and what to do with leftovers, as if Jesus would get chilly if we put him in the fridge. The main point of him promising to be in the meal is so that you can receive him.

This circumstance for communion isn’t ideal. It’s lacking some really relevant relationship. If you’re alone, you may not have another voice speaking the words of Jesus’ promise: “The body of Christ, given for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you.” But in this extraordinary moment, I believe you really need that presence, and we should and we did do what we could to make that promise available for you. Even with conundrum and lament, I am trusting that good news wins out.

Thirdly, I want to reflect on our abilities. This night can seem bleak. It starts with words of betrayal. The most committed and most confident one offers to give up his life for Jesus but is conversely told he would triply deny even knowing Jesus. The flesh is weak and can’t even linger an hour in prayer. By the end, when their violence won’t resolve anything, all decide to give up and flee.

It’s not just a sad state of affairs that Jesus had (and has) mediocre followers. After all, it was exactly those people and we people whom Jesus gathered at his table and to whom he offered himself. That offering himself is the main point. It’s not that we lay down our lives for him. It’s not that we’re so dedicated or devoted. It’s not that we manage to do it right. You probably have way too much that’s not going how you want right

now, and I’ll say: don’t be too hard on yourself. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Jesus knows that’s our story, and he came to be in solidarity with us in it. These three days are about Jesus coming to the fullest extent into our reality and bringing God’s blessing and presence into that and through it.

Tonight Jesus knows abandonment and loneliness. He knows bleak prospects that are constrained and confined. Jesus faces the direct dominion of death and the end of life.

We know those things in these days, know them intensely and relentlessly, maybe more than ever. You are at home, separate and alone. You are isolated in and surrounded by bad news of death, held captive. You don’t have answers of how to get out of this. This story in these days is sad and hard. Or sometimes it’s just boring and you get hungry or fall asleep or think you know better.

Jesus knows that. God with us in these three days and always is about getting through that reality, not just of a dark garden and contaminating kiss and evil government and going toward his own death, but also for you this evening in confronting death and striving on behalf of life, striving to bring about goodness, to offer himself in love.

That is why we tune in. We need it, and it is offered here. We need some answers for what is bad. We need encouragement to continue on. We need to be told it will be okay. More, we need actual good news. You need Jesus, with you in bread and wine, with you on a lonely evening that is not as it should be, with you in the face of death, with you when you can’t do it, with you through uncertain times, with you for what is to come.