

**Green Blades Preaching Roundtable**

**Maundy Thursday**

**March 28, 2024**

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Hymn Suggestion: ELW 358

These reflections were written a few days after Ash Wednesday, and only a few months after my wife entered home hospice. Our synod created a Lenten devotional written by a variety of persons in our synod and our companion synod in Malawi, Africa. <https://nwswi.org/malawi> (click on Journey to the Neighbor)

Deacon Laura Ramlow wrote the devotion for Ash Wednesday, which included these words by Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies:*

 “Today, let us hold the tension of the story of our making – born of the dirt, beautifully connected to the earth we walk on. And yet, possessing the knowledge of our own mortality – that our common decay cannot be escaped. As we begin Lent, help us to become honest about the ways our societies and selfhoods are marred by injustice, cruelty, neglect , and greed.”

 These words are ringing in my ears as I live into my vocation as caregiver of my wife, and the land I’m privileged to steward for God. And they form a fitting backdrop for the readings assigned for Maundy Thursday.

You are preparing to preach on Maundy Thursday, and every year the same four lessons are appointed to be read in the RCL. The same is true for Good Friday and the Vigil of Easter. And for each of these days the Gospel lesson is from John. I am reminded of a comment by my friend, Susan Briehl, regarding the Gospel of John. During a presentation to students in our Lay School of Ministry she noted that John often has Jesus teaching/acting on or near a Jewish festival. To understand what Jesus’ teaching/acting meant, it is important to know the Scripture that would have been heard at that Jewish festival. In the case of Passover (John 13:1) it would have been the Exodus 12 story (our first lesson).

The Exodus event, which Passover celebrates, and the cross, which the Eucharist celebrates, are not trapped in the past. To this day, the Passover is celebrated, and on Maundy Thursday your worshipping community will celebrate Holy Communion. Both are days of remembrance. Exodus 12:14 – “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.” 1 Corinthians 11:24 – “Do this in remembrance of me.” 1 Corinthians 11:25 – “Do this…in remembrance of me.” Your worshipping community might not be aware that the words of institution that you will be proclaiming, come from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and not our gospels.

All 3 Synoptic Gospels include details of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples; John does not. Instead we are given the powerful image of Jesus washing the disciples feet, and his command in 13:34-35 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Why doesn’t John include the last supper? Maybe it is because John has a sacramental aquafer under the entire gospel. While there might be no description of the institution of holy communion during John’s portrayal of the last supper, when you pick up the gospel and turn it upside down, bread falls out!

Remember that the worshipping communities to whom each Gospel was addressed, preceded the written Gospels, and the Synoptic Gospels were already in circulation prior to John’s Gospel. Might it be possible that the writer of John’s Gospel didn’t see a need to have Jesus’ last supper focus on something they were already doing, and instead chose to refocus it on something they were having trouble doing – serving in love?

Might this be the reason for the chiastic structure of the “last discourse” which we find in John 13-17? This five chapter long section is packed with key Johannine concepts, most of which are introduced in chapter 13 and repeated throughout the rest of this long discourse. At the very center of this careful chiastic structure we find John 15:12-17. Take time to read these verses, and then refer back to John 13:34-35.

“We love Jesus and somebody else enough, that we want them to meet each other!”

John’s Gospel is a Gospel of questions – 161 of them, 2 of which are included in today’s lesson. (13:6,12) In true Johannine form, I have a few questions of my own.

How does one show love for one another today? We know that the effects of climate change disproportionately impact the most vulnerable people/countries in the world, and we know that climate change is being exacerbated by lifestyles many of us in the developed countries of the world consider our right to enjoy. What might this call us to change in our own lives?

Young people across the globe are calling out for justice – for people, for creatures of all kinds, and for the earth itself. Are we listening? How do we, as people of faith who confess each Sunday that God is the creator of this universe and our world in particular, demonstrate that we indeed are disciples of Jesus? Might we show our love for one another by the way we choose to treat the creation God called very good? Harry Wendt, the creator of Crossways Bible Study resources, has suggested it might help us move in this direction if we added these two words to the 1st article of the creed: “and owner”.

It is helpful to remember the stated purpose of John’s Gospel. (John 20:31) In John’s gospel, faith is never something we have or a concept/belief that we tuck away in our brains. The verb“pisteuw” is a favorite of John, who uses it 96 times in the gospel. The noun “pistis” is not found in John’s gospel at all! One could say that faithing is a journey of trust, “relationshiping” with Christ; it is never belief in a set of credal doctrines. What might that mean for our own believing/faithing in our daily lives? How might John’s understanding of faith as action and not credal assent change how we treat others and God’s amazing creation?

I am reminded of the elevator speech I use to describe our synod’s Lay School of Ministry, now 30 years old and going strong. “Imagine gathering in community with others to reengage the Biblical stories and our Lutheran theology with frontal lobes fully developed so that we might live out our baptismal callings to serve God by serving our neighbors and God’s creation.”

The Psalmist proclaims that the Lord has heard my voice and my supplications. (Psalm 116:1) This is nothing new for the Lord. In yet another connection to the Exodus story, note what God does in Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-9. I doubt that God no longer hears the cries of the oppressed – human and nonhuman alike. Could we ask, as does the Psalmist “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”

I think ending with a slightly amended quote of the words of Cole Arthur Riley, Black Liturgies, is appropriate.

 “This Maundy Thursday, let us hold the tension of the story of our making – born of the dirt, beautifully connected to the earth we walk on. And yet, possessing the knowledge of our own mortality – that our common decay cannot be escaped. As we journey through Holy Week, help us to become honest about the ways our societies and selfhoods are marred by injustice, cruelty, neglect , and greed.”

 

*Pastor Greg Kaufmann served congregations in Colorado and Wisconsin between 1975-2000. He served as Assistant to the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin from 2000-2023, retiring in August, 2023, after working with 4 bishops. In 1993 he helped begin that synod's Lay School of Ministry, and currently teaches its Bible courses. In 2000 he helped start his synod’s resource center and still serves as its director. He was a member of the ELCA’s Book of Faith leadership team, and currently is part of the ELCA’s Life of Faith Initiative leadership team and the ELCA’s Lay Ministry Programs leadership team. Greg is the Director of the ELCA's Select Learning ministry. Greg has written a number of the quarterly adult Bible studies for Augsburg Fortress, and recently completed a course for Select Learning on the formation of the NT. For 20 years, Greg and Diane practiced sustainable agriculture (think rotational grazing of sheep and chickens) on their 22 acre farm near Chippewa Falls, WI. Currently Greg is living into his vocation of caregiver for his wife, who entered hospice at the end of 2023.*