

Remember
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Maundy Thursday, RCL Lectionary Year A
March 20, 2008

How many of you have sat around a family dinner table and listened to—or told—stories? I don't mean the kind that come out of a book, or even off the internet, but those family stories—how mom and dad met, what funny (or not so funny) things the kids did or said, the great vacation, the tough times. I used to sit at my grandmother's table and hear stories of how she grew up, what life was like back when she was young. I also listened to stories being told around the table when card games were played, while we watched a slide show of my grandparent's trips, and as I got older, around our dining room table or at my in-laws over dessert and coffee. All these stories help us remember about our roots, who we are, how we belong, how we too are part of the great family story.

Every time we gather for worship, we also hear stories—the stories of the family of God—who we are, how we belong, how God works in the lives of those who have gone before and in us now. We listen to these stories, those preserved in scripture, to help us remember what we are to be about as disciples of Christ, as children of God.

In our first story, that of the Passover, we remember that it is God who grants us our freedom. From the very beginning, humankind has been granted free will—the freedom to choose to God's ways or our own ways. But that freedom comes at a price; for the God who is all-powerful, who has no limits, had to choose to give up some of God's freedom so we could be free. Even when we sin or make poor choices, God does not force our hand. However, God is not above some persuasion....as is shown in the story of the first Passover, the story told at the Seder dinner. You see, the Israelites were slaves in the Egyptian nation, and had prayed to be set

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free. God sent Moses and his brother Aaron to Pharaoh, to tell Pharaoh that he should let God's people go. But Pharaoh refused, even when God sent frogs and locusts, fiery hail, endless night, and afflictions of all kinds. And so God sent the final plague—that to strike down the firstborn of every household, all the while giving instructions to the Israelites how to spare themselves, with the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the doorways of their homes. When the firstborn of the Pharaoh was struck down, Pharaoh was finally persuaded to let God's people go free—free to serve God, free to establish their own land.

As Christians, we know freedom through the sacrifice of Christ, Jesus, the Lamb of God. Just as the blood of the lamb secured the Israelites safety and freedom from the plague and slavery, so we too are saved by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Jesus was obedient to God the Father, even unto death. He was willing to go all the way to the tomb to show us the extent of God's love, a love so strong that it shatters the bonds of death. For as Jesus passed over from death into new life, he secured our freedom from the power of sin, the power of death. Through Jesus, we are called into eternal fellowship with God, as free sons and daughters of the living God.

And that brings us to our second story—that of Jesus at what is commonly known as the Last Supper—or the first Eucharist. Jesus took bread, and broke it, and said this is my body, given for you; he took the cup, and gave it for them to drink, saying this is the new covenant in my blood: Do this in remembrance of me. In this holy meal which we know as Holy Communion, Jesus shares himself with us in the bread and in the wine, strengthening us, nourishing us, joining us to himself. This is not just to act out what was done in the past, so we can remember long ago

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events. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, each time we break the one bread, and pour out the one cup, Jesus is present with us in the Sacrament. We remember, *re-member*, put together again, how Jesus loves us so much that he gave himself for us so that we may always be with him. The story is alive, here and now, for we live through it and in it, as baptized members of the Body of Christ—following our Lord wherever he may lead.

The original disciples of Jesus were his followers too. They traveled with him, ate with him, lived with him. They followed him wherever he led, even if they didn't fully understand why. He was their teacher—teaching them about God and God's ways, and how to live a life faithful to God. And yet, at their last dinner together, he served them in the most humble way known at that time—he washed their feet. And that is what we hear about in our Gospel story tonight—the footwashing, and the new commandment.

Now, footwashing in the time of Jesus was an act of hospitality offered by hosts to their guests—often upon arrival to get the dirt and dust off of one's feet. However, it was not act of hospitality that the host personally offered. It was a job left to slaves or servants--a dirty, lowly job, for people usually wore sandals and so their feet picked up a lot of dirt along the road. Even a student or disciple would not be expected to do this their master, for it was a job even too lowly for them. But Jesus, the master, had another lesson left to teach.

Jesus poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet. He knelt before them, performing a job usually reserved for the most lowly, an act of humble service. His disciples,

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particularly Peter, were taken aback, but received this gift nonetheless. For, as Jesus explained, it was to set the pattern for their life together—to serve one another, never placing one over another but to live in community—a community of love. The new commandment—that as Jesus has loved us, we are to love one another, and show that forth into this world—is central to living a life grounded in God. We are asked to remember that not one of us is better than the other, we are all equal—and all loved—in the sight of God. And just as we are loved without measure, so we are asked to love and give of ourselves without measure, never being afraid that any act of love, no matter how small, will go unnoticed by the One who humbled himself for us.

And even as we are asked to give and serve, so we are asked to receive as well. This may very well be the difficult part for many of us. We are assured of God's love in and through the life, death and resurrection of Christ—and yet we often fail to fully embrace it and let it sink into the depths of our being. We want to be made whole and healed and clean, but like Peter, we protest at the idea of being served, receiving a gift of self-giving love. But the circle must be made complete; love as you have been loved, serve one another—giving and receiving—in humility. Only then can the circle be made strong, strong enough to grow to transform the world.

So, as you come forward this night, and every time we gather together, remember the stories told. Remember the freedom given, the sacrifice made, the service rendered. Most of all, remember the love poured out for you and upon you—and remember to pour that out for one another, always.

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Amen.