



**Maundy Thursday, 2014**  
**Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, B.C.**

**John 13:1-17,31-35**

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table,\* took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

<sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' <sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet,\* but is entirely clean. And you\* are clean, though not all of you.' <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

<sup>12</sup> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' <sup>13</sup>You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants\* are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

<sup>31</sup> When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him,\* God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you

cannot come.”<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.<sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

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“Finding Our Way: Hiking Tips for Foreign Travel:” this was the name of the airline magazine article that caught my eye on a plane trip I was taking about a month ago from Vancouver to San Francisco. Written by a hiker, it focused on using simple hiking practices as a way of dealing with unforeseen circumstances that might arise while traveling in unfamiliar places.

Among the bits of advice, one caught my attention. It was this: if you get lost and confused while traveling in a foreign country, do what a seasoned hiker would do—don’t frantically try to find your way back to what is familiar. Instead, find a spot, sit down and have something to eat. This will, the writer said, give you the strength needed to figure out what to do next.

All three of our readings for tonight are about meals eaten in the midst of loss and confusion. Our first reading describes the children of Israel’s meal that they are to eat hurriedly before leaving Egypt and slavery behind. Our Epistle is Paul’s account of Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist, his last meal with the disciples, the meal we commemorate and, of course, experience tonight. And our Gospel is John’s account of this same meal, but with a twist. In this account, Jesus breaks away from the table for a moment to wash the feet of the disciples to make a point about how they are to treat each other after Jesus is gone.

Meals eaten in the midst of confusion and loss—the Israelites eating their meal not knowing what it would mean to flee their homes and their lives in Egypt and the perplexed disciples who knew something bad was about to happen but who couldn’t fully comprehend Jesus’ words about the bread and the wine as body and blood any more than they could comprehend why *he*, their leader, was bending down before them washing their dusty feet.

It must have been enough to make them all lose their appetites—the uncertainty, the queasy feeling that life as they knew it, as confused as it already was, was about to take another turn that would mean a deeper dislocation from the familiar. Yes, it’s enough to make you lose your appetite.

Why is it, then, that at times like these Scripture depicts God urging us to come to eat a meal together? God, like some kind of obtrusive mother or father who when we’re feeling lost, body and soul sick, stands at our elbow urging us to put a little something in our mouths.

There are many answers to this, of course, some of them as old as men and women sitting around a fire consuming the tribe’s latest kill and in that act, giving thanks for their survival to the life of the animal or the life of the Great Spirit that the animal participated in. And so, at the most elemental level yes, eating together is about reconstituting our community as a family as a tribe. Eating together is about connection to each other and to the source of all life.

But there’s more. In the readings tonight, we also eat to remember. We eat to remember that we have eaten before—that at other times of confusion and loss, we have, by the grace

of God been fed by the very life of God, the source of all. We eat as a way to acknowledge that we have been and are still dependent on God's graciousness for the basic sustenance of our lives.

And what is more, we eat in anticipation of a future life. Even when we've lost our appetites, we eat, trusting that there will be a future for which we will need our strength. Eating a meal, especially in times of confusion and loss is about the affirmation that God will create a path forward and that we need only do our part to accept the food that God is giving us now to find our way along that path.

And so I offer you a story that I believe captures something of the kinds of meals I'm talking about but that also captures the last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples, the meal we are remembering and reenacting tonight: a meal eaten in the midst of brokenness and loss, a meal whose message at its core was love.

It was the first meal my mother prepared for our family after our move from house to another.

This move was in the 1960's from a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama called Mountain Brook to Atlanta, Georgia. We had moved to Atlanta because my father had taken a new job there, but we'd also moved to Atlanta because my parents had become increasingly disturbed about how living in Mountain Brook had affected us.

Mountain Brook was an affluent village with the best schools in the state. This was why my parents, ever attuned to the value of education, had chosen it as our home. But as it turned out it was also the center of the orchestrated resistance to the Civil Rights movement in Alabama—the well-educated and well-heeled center of that orchestrated resistance. While my parents in their own ways did their best to counteract the racist messages in the community in which we lived, they increasingly felt that only a move away from Mountain Brook would be best for us as a family.

We moved in the middle of the summer, and it was a hot one. We moved into a new house that wasn't complete—no air conditioning yet, walls still needing to be painted. It was wrenching for the four of us kids who had no idea who we were without our friends and without the familiar community we had lived in.

Our dad had bought baseball tickets for an afternoon game, and he had taken us to the game while our mother stayed home, saying that she needed to get more things put away and would also throw together something for us to eat after the game. The game, which was supposed to be a treat, was a complete flop. We had never been to a professional baseball game before and so found the views dizzying, the pace unbearably slow and the experience disorienting.

And then there was some kind of incident that happened out of our sight when my father went to the concessions to buy us all some sort of snack between innings. Though we did not see what happened, he was unhappy and angry when he returned to us muttering something about the way a black man had been treated. After an inning or so more of misery, he got up again to call home. Though we also did not hear what he said to our

mother, years later I can only imagine that it was something about what a terrible time we were all having, something about what had happened at the concession stand, something about his worry that though we had moved an entire state away from our former home, we had not escaped the inhumanity of racism.

After the game, we arrived home in the early evening expecting sandwiches and a cool drink. But on entering the dining area in the kitchen we found something quite different than we had expected.

We found our wilted mother standing in an overheated kitchen in front of a table on which she had placed two lit candles. In the middle of the table was a pile of steaming pasta and a bowl of fragrant sweet, red tomato sauce. Next to it was an enormous salad and a large basket of toasted garlic bread. For us this was the dish of celebration, the dish of birthdays, holidays and special family events.

Now looking back on it all—looking back on the little beleaguered family that was mine, looking back on the experience of brokenness my parents had hoped we could flee, looking back on the challenges that surely lay before us, I can only imagine that this meal, the one that she and they offered us was her way of saying:

“Remember, family, we have had this meal that I have labored to give you, this meal of celebration, before. We are having it here too and will have it here again in this sweltering and seemingly hostile place of your loss and dislocation. Though you are beleaguered and overwhelmed, you are loved by me. Though the future will not be easy, you are loved by me. Eat. We will need to love one another here in this new place, where for now all we believe we have is each other. We will need to love one another.”