

Communicating Love

Our text is from the opening words of Jesus in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday. I have always been bothered by the name 'Maundy Thursday', yet I haven't switched to the more recent name 'Holy Thursday'. I've been bothered because of what "Maundy" means. It's the English form of the Latin word for commandment, and it comes from Jesus saying He gives the disciples a new commandment today. "Love one another as I have loved you." What's with a new commandment? Did we do so well with the first 10 we could use another? English poet William Blake's 1789 poem titled "Holy Thursday" says otherwise. He criticizes the church's claimed acts of love saying, "Is this a holy thing to see/ In a rich and fruitful land,/ Babes reduced to misery,/ Fed with cold and usurious hand?" And what are we called for daring to follow the ancient Church practice of Closed Communion? What are we called for rejecting Open Communion as do the Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions? At best we're called unloving at worst loveless. Then they spit back Jesus' words on Maundy Thursday: "A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you."

First, the word for command here is not the word law. This word doesn't have the connotation of prohibiting and threatening as law always does. This word refers to the absolute authority of the one issuing the command and not to the content of the command. The word highlights that Jesus speaks as God with divine authority (*Scaer, Law and Gospel, 73-77*).

Second, Jesus had already told them to love their neighbor and enemies, so what's new with "love one another as I have loved you?" What's new is what had just happened. Jesus new "commandment" is spoken right after Judas had gone out to betray Him. Jesus had called Judas to repentance 3 times. Once by exposing the plot saying, "One of you will betray Me." Next by saying, "It would be better to never have been born than to betray Me." And finally Jesus says, "The one to whom I give this piece of bread will betray Me." If Jesus told you, "If you eat this piece of bread, you will cheat on your spouse," wouldn't your jaws clamp shut if there was the least bit of repentance there? But Judas took it and with that bread Scripture says Satan entered him.

Third, the command is to love one another as I have loved you. The setting is the upper room where only the 12 have gathered with Jesus. The disciples will only know the connection between Judas leaving to betray Jesus and the command to love one another after Easter. We are after Easter; we know. Jesus is rescuing us from definitions of the word "love" that have to do with what I like, what I feel, what is nice, what others want. In letting Judas go, Jesus shows us love doesn't always run after; love doesn't always comfort; love recognizes a separation when it happens. Right after Judas leaves Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you."

This new commandment *does* relate to Communion. And as I said, we who practice Closed Communion know this. How many times have I been told by guests, by members, by church leaders that not allowing everyone to commune is loveless? It's not loving to make distinctions. It's not loving to make separations. If you think this way, then better not write a will. A will makes distinctions. It leaves certain things to certain people. While causing some to inherit, it disinherits others. Communion is Jesus' last will and testament. It's what He leaves behind Him. As in all wills, Jesus regards some as heirs and disinherits others. How offended you would be if I challenged your will? How angry you would be if I said, "You have no right to not give this person anything, or you must leave this person that."

Yet there's a fly in ointment. It goes back to the Sinner King. Here's the story: the Holy Grail, the chalice the Lord supposedly used on Maundy Thursday, was eventually taken up to heaven because men were so wicked. A descendant of Joseph of Arimathea was the guardian of the chalice on the condition that he be pure in thought, word, and deed. One of the guardians failed when a young woman's robe accidentally loosened as she knelt before him. Instantly the Lord punished his frailty with a deep wound in his side that would never heal. Ever after the guardian of the Holy Grail was called *Le Roi Pêcheur*, "The Sinner King" (*Bulfinch's Mythology, 486*). Who among us doesn't have the incurable wound of lust open on his side? Who among us does not the Law disinherit? Who among us is ever pure enough in deed, word, let alone thought to be heirs of the Body and Blood of God? Not a one. Therefore, if we are all equally guilty why should only some not be communed? This is the logic of the majority of pastors and churches, and so they practice open Communion. To do anything less is loveless they say. How do we respond? We respond: Jesus loves those He communes and Jesus loves those He doesn't commune.

Let's go over the facts. Jesus came into the world to save sinners even king and queen sinners. He took on Flesh and Blood to live in them a life pure in thought, in word, and in deed. Jesus had no open wound on His side

indicative of a heart always gnawed by lust, money, power, life, or death. Jesus was a holy, spotless Lamb, so He was a fit sacrifice for sheep who love to wander. He gave His pure Body to torture, to suffering, to damning, to dying in place of all impure bodies. He shed His pure Blood to cover, to wash away, to atone for the sins of all putrid blood. On the night He was betrayed, on the day before He died, Jesus made out His will leaving the Body He gave on the cross and the Blood He shed there to sinners.

Okay, if we admit He gave His Body and shed His Blood on the cross for all and gives the same Body and Blood on our altar, why shouldn't we distribute them to all? For one, Jesus didn't. At the first Lord's Supper the only ones there were those Jesus had instructed for 3 years. Not even Jesus' mother was invited. Second, Paul says at the Lord's Supper "there have to be differences among you to show which have God's approval" (1 Cor. 11:19).

We have to stop believing this: communing someone always means you love them and not communing them always means you don't. Love makes distinctions. After a child has had a serious bout of stomach flu, loving parents will not give the recovering child certain foods. That child will cry for it; wail for it. Is it because the parents don't love the child they withhold the food? Of course not. Again, when you have several young kids and only one of them has the bubblegum tasting medicine, the other kids want it too. Loving parents gives the medicine to all their kids. Of course they don't. That would be unloving. Yet not giving the Medicine of Immortality to whoever wants it is always unloving even though Paul says this Medicine can make a person weak, sick or even kill if the wrong person takes it?

Right at this point is where some of my own members have been unwilling or unable to make distinctions. The unworthy person to whom if I give communion I would make them weaker, possibly sicker, or even kill them is the person who defends their sins and/or doesn't believe what Jesus says is here, is. You defend your right to keep on sinning in any way: don't come to this altar for you eat and drink condemnation on yourself. You defend the false teaching that Jesus is present in Communion only spiritually: stay away from this altar for you eat and drink death not life. Love makes a distinction between repentant sinners and those defending their sins because those defending their sins meet Jesus not as Savior but as judge, not as Physician but as Mortician.

However, there's another distinction we make at this altar not about worthy versus unworthy Communion but about fellowship, about who should commune together. In cases of worthy versus unworthy Communion love makes a distinction for the sake of someone's soul. In cases of who should commune together love makes a distinction for the sake of truth.

Our sense of truthfulness wouldn't let a UT player play for A&M or a Ranger pretend he is an Astro. In the matter of a game, a sporting event that has no eternal consequences and will be forgotten in 3 years by all but the sports fanatic, we're concerned with truthfulness, with honesty. Yet in the name of love I'm to let the Baptist be a Lutheran for a service. In the name of love, I'm to pretend that the ELCA and I believe the same things for a day. Most of you know that's wrong, and you don't want me to do this. No, the new commandment Jesus gave in light of Judas leaving and His not going out to follow is love one another as He loved them, including Judas. This love doesn't mean doing whatever the other person wants you to but doing what is loving according to a higher purpose than your feelings or fears. That Jesus has this sort of love in mind is shown in the Greek word He uses, *agape*.

In the early church there was a community meal connected to Communion called the *agape*, or Love Feast. Cretans had similar meals called *andria* because only men, *andros*, came. The Spartans called these communal meals *philitia* from the Greek word *filia* which you know from Philadelphia means brotherly love. The Spartans called their meals *philitia* because they were for the opportunity of making friends (Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, 41). *Filia* is a love of feeling, affection, warmth. The Christians called their meals *agape* because Jesus says, "Agape one another as I agape you." This love is one of intelligence and purpose, not the warm, fuzzy feeling of affection or liking. It's a love that will hurt someone's feelings for their spiritual good. It's a love that won't pretend to do the impossible: join truth to error; light with darkness; belief with unbelief (2 Cor. 6:13-15). It's a love that fallen man has little use for, but God loved the world with so that He gave His only beloved Son and the Son gave His Body and Blood, for, in place of. So it's an eternally old love to God, but it's a new commandment, a new direction, a new privilege to us who eat Jesus' Body and drink His Blood. Amen.

Rev. Paul R. Harris

Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas

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