

Sermon Preached Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-15
April 9, 2009
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in July 1969. On the day of the moon landing, Buzz Aldrin wrote, "we awoke at 5:30 a.m., Houston time. Neil and I separated from Mike Collins in the command module. Our powered descent was right on schedule. With only seconds worth of fuel left, we touched down at 3:30 p.m. Now was the moment for Communion. So I unstowed the elements in their flight packets. I put them and the Scripture reading on the little table in front of the abort guidance-system computer. Then I called back to Houston. 'Houston, this is Eagle. This is LM Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whoever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way.'

“For me, this meant taking Communion. In the blackout I opened the little plastic packages, which contained bread and wine. I poured wine into the chalice my parish had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were consecrated elements. Just before I partook of the elements I read the words, which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as man probes into space, we are in fact acting in Christ. I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the Church everywhere. I read: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him, will bear much fruit; for without me you do nothing.’”

Today is Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” is an Old English word coming from the Latin, “Mandatum,” which translates into our English meaning, “Something commanded.” The readings this evening all have to do with, “Something commanded.”

In the Exodus reading the Israelites are commanded to sacrifice and eat an unblemished lamb. They are given very specific instructions as to what kind of lamb to slaughter, when it should be killed, how it should be prepared and with what accompaniments, how to clean up after it, and what clothes to wear. Then the blood of the animal should be smeared on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. In this way God's plague "passes over" them. They are saved by the blood of the lamb and then freed from slavery to Pharaoh.

Our Epistle reading gives us Christ's commandment from the Last Supper. "This is my body... this is my blood... do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." "For whenever you eat this bread AND drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." We are saved by the blood of Christ and freed from slavery to sin. (1 Cor. 11:26) I found the story of Buzz Aldrin moving because it underscores how cosmic an event the Eucharist is. God coming to earth, taking human form, and dying to make the whole creation new. In the Great Thanksgiving we say the words from Isaiah 6, "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest." The Christ event is not simply about our one little planet, it is about universal salvation.

This first Eucharist is not mentioned in the Gospel of John. Instead he describes the foot washing, the final commandment of our readings. Jesus performs this act of humble service for his disciples and then says “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” [Jn 13:34].

But there is something else going on here as well. Judas is present during the foot washing. We are told Jesus knows he will be betrayed, and by whom, yet Jesus humbly washes the feet of the man who will hand him over to be killed. The foot washing becomes an act of forgiveness. Jesus washes Judas clean, as Christ too washes our sins away. The example that Jesus sets and commands us to follow is one of humility and forgiveness, attributes found most fully in the expression of love.

So on Maundy Thursday there are a number of commandments. The first is given to the Israelites to eat the Passover meal. As a result of this obedience to His word, God saves his people from slavery to Pharaoh and death.

The second commandment is from the Last Supper to eat Christ's body and blood. The Eucharist becomes a remembrance of his death, a way to make him physically part of us and we a part of the Body of Christ, and a proclamation of his coming again. As Buzz Aldrin said, by partaking of communion he felt unity with his church back home. Communion is a community event strengthening the Body of Christ, the people. As a result of this obedience to His word, God saves God's people from slavery to sin and death. Finally, from the foot washing we are given the commandment to love one another, with a love that requires both humility and forgiveness.

These commandments we read tonight summarize the law Jesus tells us to follow, to love God and neighbor. The Eucharist strengthens our relationship with God. Both the Eucharist and the foot washing qualities of service, humility and forgiveness strengthen our relationships with each other. Let us bear these commandments in mind as we live them out tonight and always.

Amen.