

Theme: The abundance of God

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather this night to remember Jesus' last meal: may we always gather, in remembrance, recalling Jesus' concern for his friends and for us, through him who gave us signs of your kingdom, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I think we have all heard that we as a nation are getting bigger. Portion sizes in restaurants are getting bigger. Fast food restaurants seem to multiply like rabbits.

Well, now it turns out Jesus' disciples are having trouble with portion control. A study by a Cornell University professor and his brother who is a Presbyterian minister and a religious studies professor, showed that the sizes of the portions and plates in the artworks of the Last Supper, which were painted over the past millennium, have gradually grown by between 23 and 69 percent.

“The researchers analyzed 52 paintings depicting the Last Supper which were featured in the 2000 book *Last Supper* by Phaidon Press, and used computer-aided design technology to analyze the size of the main meals, or entrees, bread and the plates relative to the average size of the disciples' heads.

“The study found that, over the past 1,000 years, the size of the main meal has progressively grown 69 percent; plate size has increased 66 percent and bread size by about 23 percent.” (Yahoo News)

Brian Wansink, director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, confirms that the art changes reflect what happening on our dinner plates. He said, “The last thousand years have witnessed dramatic increases in the production, availability, safety, abundance and affordability of food. We think that as art imitates life, these changes have been reflected in paintings of history's most famous dinner.”

Our meal downstairs tonight will not be as sumptuous, but we should not leave here hungry. There is another possibility about the paintings. It could

be that paintings 1,000 years ago reflected the modest portions of the time. For Jesus and his friends, they walked a lot, burning a lot of calories. Maybe they ate more than the artists. I'm just saying.

The paintings depict a small room. I always imagined a small room. But when I went to the room in Jerusalem that is said to be *the room*, it is big. We don't know how many disciples were in the room for that last supper. Paintings seem to always assume the meal was shared with Jesus and the twelve apostles. But scripture doesn't say the guest list was limited to thirteen.

The room I saw could accommodate maybe 150 people. This is taking into account that meals in ancient times were taken reclining, so more room is needed than what we would need. Tables barely clearing the floor were arranged in a square. Men would recline on cushions surrounding the square, mainly leaning on the one side that is used for conversation. Women were required to sit on chairs.

The Passover feast was coming soon. In John, the last supper takes place before the Passover, making this a regular meal between a rabbi and his disciples. Jesus knew that this particular Passover would be different than other Passovers. He knew that he would die before seeing the Passover. He also knew that his love for his friends knew no bounds.

Judas Iscariot had already decided that he was going to betray Jesus. According to John, evil in the form of the devil had entered Judas' heart. Knowing that his death was imminent, Jesus also knew that his death was merely a transition. It was not final.

Presumably during dinner, Jesus got the idea for a teaching opportunity. He got up from the table and washed the feet of the disciples during supper. Can you imagine what went through the minds of the disciples while Jesus was doing this?

I would have to think that it was uncomfortable. Jesus was breaking a social taboo. It should have been one of them washing Jesus' feet. But not one of them ever offered. Instead, they silently offered their dirty, dusty feet for Jesus to wash them. Maybe some in the group, whose egos were big enough, thought that at last someone was washing his feet, even if it had to be Jesus.

All of this was too much for Peter. Jesus should not be stooping so low as to wash his feet! He would not remain silent like his friends. Peter believed it was beneath Jesus' dignity and status in the group to wash the disciple's feet. So Peter objected. Jesus knew that he would not understand what he was doing, but that understanding would come later for Peter and probably also for the rest of them.

To keep the debate short, Jesus told Peter that dirty feet meant Peter was out of the group. Peter, in his usual bravado, then asks Jesus to give him a bath. Jesus said that if you already bathed, it was not necessary for another bath. Jesus then declares the disciples clean, except for Judas. Jesus knew all about Judas' plans. *Even* Jesus cannot make Judas clean.

Yet, washing feet may lead us into a new way to see our faith and our relationships. Jesus calls us to radical change. Foot washing is a sacramental rite. Peter tried to refuse to have his feet washed. Jesus convinced him that humility is part of following Jesus.

The people at table with Jesus for that meal were far from perfect: a betrayer, a denier, those who sleep on the job, and all the rest who ran away in Jesus' greatest time of need. Jesus washed the ugliness away. My hunch is that we who are gathered here tonight are less than perfect followers of Jesus. Yet, Jesus still accepts us as we are.

Jesus is now glorified. Jesus has some last instructions before he leaves them. He saves the most important for last. Before things hit the fan, Jesus has one last commandment for his friends, "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."

That is how the world will know that we are Christians, if we love one another. This commandment, this *mandatum*, makes this day Maundy Thursday, the day of the *mandatum*, the day of *the* commandment: love one another. Still, it is sad that after the roughly three years spent living with Jesus, Jesus has to plead with them to love one another. We, too, need this reminder.

Sharing a meal. Washing feet. These are signs of the kingdom of God. Jesus tried to show people during his life that God's kingdom is one of abundance. God's banquet is overflowing with food. (Of course, that doesn't mean we have to eat all of it.) Scarcity is what we live with now. With God, scarcity is a thing of the past. That last meal Jesus had with his friends is a sign of our future. Whenever we gather for Eucharist, we glimpse our future with God.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, give us always the gift of your abundant love, and receiving that love, we, in turn, will share that love with others, filling the plates of all we encounter in this country and in other countries, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Yahoo News contributed to this sermon.]

Text: **John 13:1–17, 31b–35** (NRSV)

¹ 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. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ 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. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² 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? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Maundy Thursday

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