

A Feast Prepared with Love
Maundy Thursday
April 18, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

‘This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord.’
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The longing for a sit-down dinner with those we love is at the heart of Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means mandate, or commandment. We rightly link this to the new commandment Jesus gives the disciples at the end of our Gospel passage about the Last Supper: ‘Love one another.’

Jesus demonstrated how to live out this commandment before their supper together by washing each of his disciples’ feet, a service we will offer in a few moments. But this new commandment really has its birth in a very old commandment given at the end of our passage from Exodus. It is a commandment for each family to set aside a day to observe the Passover, the event in which God spared the enslaved people of Israel from the plague of the angel of death that was to kill every first-born male child in the land of Egypt.

God did this through an elaborate set of instructions to the Israelites that reads less like a Bible story, and reads more like a faded yellow recipe card that had been handed down from Great-Grandma to Grandma to Mama to Daughter. Each family was given this recipe of exactly how to roast the lamb. And, if your family was too small for a whole lamb, you shall be joined to a neighbor family to share one. In other words, it would be a communal meal much like the one we’ll celebrate around the altar tonight. Each family was to take some of the blood from the lamb and place it on the two doorposts and the lintel of their home. That was the sign for the plague to “pass over” that home. And God’s commandment is for each family to re-enact this meal each year, and to pass down this story of God’s deliverance and the tradition of how it happened from generation to generation to generation. Essentially, it is a commandment to *remember*.

In the realm of God, remembering is not simply recalling a past event. It is seeing how a past event is actualized simultaneously into a present reality and a future promise. Remembering God’s act of love in delivering the people of Israel, gives birth to Jesus’ act of love in washing feet, and gives hope to a kingdom characterized by a meal prepared with love.

In 1987, a film entitled *Babette’s Feast* was made. It is the story of two beautiful daughters of a very strict Danish Lutheran pastor who is a widower. The sisters are named Martinna and Phillipa. Although they are heavily courted, they never marry in order to please their father. He wanted them to be ascetically drawn to another world instead of succumbing to the sensual traps of this world. The suitor of Martinna is a young cavalry officer, while Phillipa is courted by an opera singer. When the father overhears the singer and Phillipa practicing a passionate love duet from Don Giovanni, he sends the singer packing back to Paris. Likewise, the pastor successfully breaks up the courtship of Martinna and the cavalry officer.

Years later, the father dies and the sisters now share a home. They devote their lives to serving others. In the meantime, the opera singer becomes caught up in an uprising that terrorizes Paris. He befriends a woman named Babette who is in danger and he remembers the kindness of the sisters in Denmark. He helps Babette escape to them to work as their servant. Although they feel they have no need of a servant, the sisters graciously take Babette into their home.

Babette's only remaining connection to France is a lottery ticket that is renewed in her name each year. Since their father's death, the sisters have a tough time holding the dwindling little church community together. Old feuds resurface and bitter quarrelling takes place. The sisters wonder if the church will stay together for a modest supper they plan to host at their home on the 100th anniversary of their father's birth. While preparing a meal for the sisters one day, Babette gets a letter from France. She's won the lottery! She receives 10,000 francs, a large sum during the 1800s.

The sisters assume she'll probably use the money to move back to Paris. Instead, she does something unexpected. She offers to prepare a French dinner for the church for the 100th anniversary of the pastor's birth. Babette asks for several days off so that she can search for the finest ingredients and make elaborate preparations for this meal.

As the sisters see a large turtle bought for the soup, they begin to have nightmares about this meal. The sisters secretly call the church together and confess that Babette is preparing this unholy meal, but they feel there's no way out of it. For Babette has been such a faithful servant and preparing this meal is the only thing she's ever asked of them. The church members all make a pact that, yes, we will eat the meal. But, we will not enjoy it!

Babette artistically cooks an amazing 7-course feast! One of the guests is the officer who once courted Martinna. He is now an old general. When he tastes the quail in a scrumptious truffle sauce, he remembers a chef in Paris who had the ability to transform a meal into a kind of love affair – a love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite. As the church members feast on that 7-course meal, their ascetic resolves are overcome by the delicacies prepared with artistry and lavish love. They not only enjoy the meal, their lives are changed by it.

The extraordinary quality of this meal and the act of love behind it elevate their Christianity to a whole new level. They remember their beloved pastor and remember the words he always taught them, 'Little children, love one another.' But now these words are no longer a platitude, they're real – they can actually be tasted! With each scrumptious bite and each delicious sip, they look into each other's eyes and ask for and give forgiveness to put aside old feuds. Smiles came to their faces.

After the dinner, Babette reveals her identity to the sisters she is the great chef that the general remembered. She discloses that she never desired to return to Paris. Besides, she spent all her money on this meal. Instead, she wishes to remain a servant to the sisters. As one of the sisters hugs her and Babette gently pats her, you can tell something has changed. Babette is no longer a servant. She is now the third sister! From a shared meal, a new family is born.

Washing each other's feet, gathering around this table, and remembering our shared story are the ways we pass down our identity to one another as beloved children of Jesus.
Little children, love one another and prepare yourselves for the feast. *Amen.*