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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/5/2012, Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the end of this evening's liturgy comes one of the most moving deeds of the entire liturgical year: I mean, the stripping of the altar. Christine Hoffman and Kenda Ward are here to do what they have so often done for us: they remove the furnishings from our chancel. Step by step, as the solemn Psalms are read aloud and as Chris Schulze gradually turns out the lights in our church, Kenda and Christine quietly remove everything in sight. As the church becomes darker, the chancel becomes barer. And if we are able to choreograph things right, with the final cry of Psalm 88 -- "and darkness is my only companion" -- the final lights go out, the chancel is empty, and we head toward home in silence and darkness.

The stripping of the altar signifies the stripping away of the life of our Lord Jesus. For this night, Maundy Thursday, is "the night in which he was betrayed." After this evening's Passover supper with his disciples, after Jesus has instituted the Last Supper, washed the feet of his disciples, and shared his farewell discourse with them, he heads out to a garden. There he is arrested, and the stripping away of his life begins.

One of our dear members once mentioned to me that the stripping of the altar is always sad for her because it leads her to think how lonely and poorer our world would be if Jesus were not in it. Suppose the chancel things were solemnly taken away never to be returned. Suppose they were never to be returned because the stripping away of our Lord's life was not answered by Easter. Suppose the "night in which our Lord was betrayed" was the night that brought the final perishing of Jesus and his ceasing to be. Then our world would indeed be poorer.

One of our favorite hymns around here is LBW hymn 325, "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart." The first verse speaks of heaven being "void and bare":

Lord, thee I love with all my heart;
I pray thee, ne'er from me depart;
with tender mercy cheer me.
Earth has no pleasure I would share,
yea, heav'n itself were void and bare
if thou, Lord, wert not near me.

Well, if heaven itself be void and bear without Jesus, so too would be this old earth of ours. So, in this sermon I want to suggest some reasons why we are happy that Maundy Thursday's stripping of the altar is soon replaced by Easter Sunday's sunlight, lilies, white paraments, and the beginning acclamation of that liturgy, "He is risen, Alleluia!! He is risen, indeed!"

Let me lift up three reasons why it is good that Jesus is not forever stripped away from our earth:

- 1) If Jesus entirely perishes, never to return, then the disciples will certainly have lost their greatest Friend.
- 2) If the stripping of the altar is matched by the stripping away of Jesus from our world, then you and I have likewise lost our greatest Friend.
- 3) If Jesus is not alive, then the great and final Passover has little chance. But we sure need that great and final Passover!

THE DISCIPLES

First, then, the disciples. On the night in which our Lord was betrayed, the disciples were nigh to losing their greatest Friend.

Our Gospel Lesson for this evening opens with one of the most dramatic of lines. St. John introduces the story with this verse:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, *he loved them to the end.* (John 13:1, RSV)

Peter hoped to love in this manner. Peter hoped that he would love Jesus "to the end." That is why he swore that he would never abandon Jesus:

³³Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. ³⁴Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. ³⁵Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:33-35, KJV)

But Peter's love fell short of his promise. He hoped to love Jesus "to the end," but in the moment of crisis, Peter's love faltered. Never did the love of Jesus do such a thing. St. John perfectly expresses the truth about Jesus: having loved his disciples, he loved them to the end. He proved their greatest Friend.

And his friendship was not the lucky kind. Some friends remain true for the simple reason they are not much tested. The friendship goes along well and

easy. No threat, no temptation, no heartbreak comes along to disrupt the friendship. The friends enjoy their relationship without having to pay much of a cost.

But the friendship of Jesus was not that kind. Jesus befriended folks he knew were perishing if he did not help them. Jesus knew of his disciples that their eternal destiny was at risk. When he walked along the Sea of Galilee and summoned the fishermen to follow him, he was commencing a friendship that would result in the eternal death of these friends if he did not intervene to save them.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord committed himself to intervening for the sake of his friends. That is what the Holy Communion is about. It is an “acted-out parable,” as theologian David Yeago once put it. Jesus took the things at hand -- bread and wine - identified himself with them, and broke them! Thereby he signaled that he was ready for the path ahead. He knew he was heading for the Cross unless he ran away from it. But in the Last Supper, Jesus signaled his determination to see the saving of his disciples through. His body and his blood, he explained, are given “for you.” I imagine his gaze took in each of the Twelve, even treacherous Judas, and he let them know that he intended to die for them that they might live.

Had Jesus died and remained dead, then those disciples would have lost their dearest Friend. They would have lost a friend whose love did not fail, no matter the cost he must bear. His love is of a sturdier stuff than Peter’s.

HERE IS A WONDER!

Now, here is a wonder: everything I have just said about the Twelve disciples also applies to you and to me. If Jesus be stripped entirely away, then you and I too have lost our dearest Friend and earth indeed has become void and bare.

How can this be? How can it be that the love Jesus clearly had for his disciples is a love so vast that it includes you and me, here at the ragged edge of the third millennium? Answer: it includes you and me because Baptism inducts us into the holy company of the disciples. When Jesus celebrates the Supper with his disciples, you and I are there, around a vast table indeed. And when Jesus looks down from the cross and prays, “Father, forgive” he is looking us in the eye too, for we too are part of that forgiven group of sinners gathered around Golgotha’s bloody cross.

And what was said concerning the disciples could also be said of us. That is, we are unlikely friends of Jesus. I mean, our mixed-up lives fall far short of his holiness. And we are destined to die if he does not do something. You’d think we are the sorts of folk any reasonable person would not choose to befriend, not if it meant having to die for us. But the dear hymn is right, “What a Friend

We Have in Jesus.” His love is so vast and burns so brightly, that it overlooks the fact that he must die in order to save us. He knows he must die, but he is ready for that. He submits to death that we might live.

So, when St. John says that Jesus “loved his own unto the end,” that includes you and me. And our world would indeed be sadder and barer if the stripping of the altar meant that we were eternally bereft of Jesus. Come Easter morning, we will sing Alleluia because we are not left bereft.

PASSOVER

My final reason for being glad that the stripping of the altar does not represent the final defeat of Jesus is that if Jesus is done and gone, then the great Passover has little chance. But we need the great Passover, very much indeed.

I mentioned in the Palm Sunday sermon that Passover is a threat against every empire. First it was a threat against Egypt, then a threat against Rome. Passover represents the possibility that a poor, subjugated people will nonetheless break free of the great empire because that small people has a great God.

Well, our human race is subject to the worst and strongest of empires: the empire of death and the devil. Their rule is firm. Who escapes death? Who breaks away from the devil?

But the Passover meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples in the night in which he betrayed is a kind of foretaste of that greater Passover in which humanity breaks free of sin, death, and the devil. Their power is broken by Jesus.

And so it is that if the stripping of the altar meant the final defeat of Jesus, our world would indeed be a lonelier and sadder place. But Easter Sunday is coming. Jesus goes out this evening and is arrested, thus beginning the process of his cruel death. But Easter comes. Err long, Easter morning comes and a new and better chapter begins in the story of our human race, thanks to the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.