

Maundy Thursday
April 6, 2023
Exodus 24:3-11
Hebrews 9:11-22
Matthew 26:17-30

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Everything alive has needs. Plants, animals, fish, they all need something to survive. For mammals, the most basic needs are those for food, water, and shelter. It is impossible to sustain mammalian life without meeting these needs on some level. Humans have needs that go beyond the needs of animals. Some of our needs can be considered emotional needs, such as the need to be loved, to be accepted, the need to belong. More than ascribing such needs as merely the emotional needs of our psychology, I would say that these are needs of the soul, and they can be summarized as being a need for roots. Several factors contribute to the feeling of rootedness in us. Shared language, history, art, law, and religion are all important aspects of culture that can help us feel rooted. Most often, attachment to specific places does not happen by accident. Under good circumstances, home feels like home because it is where you live, where you love, and where you are loved. To have a home, to feel a sense of belonging, this is what it means to have roots. What is harder to explain is why we can feel at home in places that are far from home in terms of geography, language, and culture. Perhaps this connection we can feel to places beyond our comfort zone is there because our roots extend into unfamiliar soils which have nourished us from a distance.

Distance can mean geographical space, but it can also mean distance in time. Time can separate people just as much as space does. Connections that can transcend space and time must be built on the needs of the soul, and one of the ways that our need for rootedness is fulfilled is through story. Not merely history, which in the modern West is more of a chronology of names and dates with no real sense of attachment to people or events. I mean story, the foundational truth-revealing myths that are passed down through the generations, not just because the story captures what happened, but because it is formational in how a people understands themselves as a people. Stories establish and deepen our roots. Every individual has a story, but it doesn't take long to see that no one has an exclusive story. No one has lived alone. Every story is interconnected with other stories, with many people coming into and out of each other's lives in a seemingly meaningless and random way, unless the story is told in such a way that the meaning of such comings and goings can be revealed. Every people has a collective story that serves to bind them together at a common point in time. Just in this room, we have a common story as Californians, as Americans, as Lutherans, and as Christians. Our paths have converged in this place at this time. The stories are diverse when viewed from a certain perspective, but as the interconnectedness of the stories unfolds, there is a point of convergence in space and time. The story moves towards a common point in time - 1776, 1517, 325, to about 30 AD. But our story as the Church runs even further back in history than that. Our story is bound to Christ, the Jewish Messiah, who has a story of His own, who lived as a Jew, a people liberated from Egypt by the mighty hand of God so very long ago during the exodus.

One cannot overstate the importance of the role of Passover in the development of the people of Israel. In fact, Passover is the founding of Israel in history and going forward in perpetuity. From the establishment and practice of that first Passover meal, to the ongoing practice of the Jewish people, Passover is a definitional rite. Passover also shapes the ingrafting of the Church into the life of Israel which we participate in through the Eucharist. A Jewish political philosopher has this to say about Passover:

The one-time enactment is a modest (yet impressive) pre-deliverance people forming event, as each family declares its willingness to be delivered by killing a lamb, marking the doorposts of their house with its blood, and eating the prescribed meal... The annual commemorative practice is an elaborate people-renewing event, as each family relives the deliverance by telling its story and recreating its festive meal.¹

Passover took place on the night of a full-moon, a natural occasion which was considered bad luck by the people of the ancient Near East. This new moon marked a new reckoning of time for Israel, as they were called the Congregation of Israel for the first time during this sequence of events. In a remarkable display of defiance, in the full light of the moon, the people of Israel would publicly proclaim that they received the gift of liberation by sacrificing animals the Egyptians considered sacred. It was a vote, cast in the blood of the lambs which they used to mark their doors as those who were redeemed.² The Passover is the story of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt, but the "essence of the story lies not in mere (political) liberation from bondage but in liberation *for* a (more than political) way of life in relation to the Liberator."³ Along with the story of the Passover, the people of Israel have the Torah, the Prophets, and the story of God's fidelity even in the face of Israel's repeated failures. Israel was a people called to live under God's divine instruction and to be the congregation with horizontal and vertical responsibilities, both toward their fellow men and toward God.

What God provided for His people in the Passover, in the event and in the story celebrated annually, is fertile soil which provides nutrients that sustain robust roots. Root systems invariably will draw from the soils surrounding them. Nowhere does the Church exist in a vacuum, nor would it be useful for God's purposes if it somehow could. Christians in America have come of age in a culture which operates under a false pretense. Contrary to popular opinion, no one is autonomous, for we exist under God's divine mandates, and every society has laws and mores in force. Autonomy means self-law, as in man is a law unto himself. Autonomy was the false myth sold to Adam and Eve in the garden, that man can be a law unto himself, free from obligations to others and responsible only for himself. What was forbidden, perhaps even more than fruit, was the notion of human autonomy, a direct outcome of the eating. Forbidding fruit was more than an arbitrary command. The consequence of the eating was that humans would believe the serpent's lies, that humans would see themselves as the arbiters of good and evil, and humanity would reject the will of God, having a greater desire to rule themselves. God forbade autonomy to man, even though He allowed for the freedom to indulge in the illusion.

¹ Leon Kass, *Founding God's Nation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 160-161.

² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 162.

Certain political philosophies advocate for the ideal of autonomous man. An insane desire is this notion of autonomy, since no one would want their neighbor to be a law unto themselves, especially if their neighbor's law paid no regard to personal rights. It is a fallacy to believe that stated rights are sufficient for their protection. Obligations supersede rights, and both rights and obligations limit autonomy. Yet, autonomy is continuously promoted as an inherent good.

The only way that a flower can exist autonomously is if it is cut off from its roots at the soil. So too, an autonomous soul is one that has been cut off from its roots, and it leads to a disintegration of the individual, a disintegration of morality, of responsibility, of community, of congregation. The entirety of the human spirit is integrated into social relations, human and divine, and it flourishes only in the relationships of a "you and I".⁴ We need roots, deeply entrenched in soil that promotes the interdependence of communities while not sacrificing the individual entirely. This is the way of Christ's Church, but many Christians in America have lost sight of it. An unrooted people, reactionary in their ideology, spouting off terminology they neither understand nor deploy honestly in discussion, have done a great deal of harm to the coming generation. Nearly everything has become an ideological buzzbomb to be launched without due consideration for what the words mean: liberalism, conservatism, capitalism, socialism, communism, autonomy, even male and female have become distorted and weaponized. In a sense, we have become autonomous, a law unto ourselves, and the disintegrated consequences should not surprise us at all. We ought to give up our autonomous delusions in submitting ourselves to God's will.

The solution to the problem of autonomy is to reconnect with our story. If Passover is the people-making meal of the covenant God made with Israel, we ought to see the Lord's Supper as the people-making meal of the new covenant. Like the Church, the communion of the saints is both an end in itself and a means to an end. It is an end in itself in the sense that, when we commune, we make the command to love our neighbor concrete, as Christ accomplishes this, in reality, as we commune at His altar. Christ makes it reality by bringing it into being. This love constitutes real Christian community, in spite of whatever differences may persist between us, between you and your neighbor. The meal shapes us into a people, without denomination, whose center of existence is Christ our Lord. The communion of the saints is also a reality that transcends space and time, drawing us into the fertile soil of the real Church, the body of believers, past, present, and future, who exist as the body of Christ in eternity. Those are not empty words, but a truth worthy of a lifetime of contemplation, even as you live out the reality.

The communion of the saints is also a means to an end in that it serves to renew us into this reality of unity over and over again. The whole Church throughout the world, is fed and nourished as its sins are forgiven. We find community here, not as autonomous beings, but as those who have been loved by Christ, and have been made into His people through the story of his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Are not all these present in the story He tells at the new Passover? This is my body, an incarnational reality, given for you in His crucifixion, for the forgiveness of sins, the hope of which is seen in His resurrection. This is His story. Because it is His story, we are drawn into it, and it becomes our story. As such, it is the basis of Christian community that exists in Him, and it exists in reality in spite of the different views of the elements.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sacrum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 73.

Christ's love transcends our differences and draws us together where we are rooted in Him, and we live as His one congregation.

We are rooted in Christ. We are rooted by way of His story. We are participants in Christ by way of this feast. At this altar, as the priests of Israel once gathered around, saw God, and ate and drank, we too gather around, to see God revealed in the breaking of bread, and we eat and drink in His presence. In the rite of the new Passover, we have an interesting story of reversal. What was forbidden to Adam and Eve was a fruit that would bring about autonomy and the disintegrating consequences thereof. That moment in time was the point of departure; the consumption of the forbidden which brought death. In the new Passover in Christ, we find that the forbidden, the consumption of blood, becomes the origin of our life in Christ. In this eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood, we have life triumphant over sin and death. We eat His flesh and drink His blood, and He gives His life to us. Here, we are brought to life in Christ, a life we live together. We are not autonomous. Our law is to do the will of God, which means that we live in Christ, following Him, walking in His way, all for the sake of the world and to His glory. Rooted in Him through this story, we know we are loved and accepted. In His story is where we belong.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit. Amen.