
The Maundy Thursday Scandal

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
All Saints Church, Atlanta, Georgia
Maundy Thursday

For the All Saints Church and St. Luke's Church Holy Week Preaching Series

What kind of supper do you like?

The Episcopalians here like our dinners formal! We set the table with fine linens and with silver vessels. We buy our bread from elegant establishments. We serve deep and rich wine.

Our servers --our deacons, priests, and bishops-- wear old-fashioned costumes and garments. They recite precise words and wave their hands like some ancient pantomime.

We like our dinners so formal that we expect our servers to wear no expression at all on their faces -like the Swiss Guard at Buckingham Palace. At one time, we even preferred that our priests turn away from us as they said the blessing over the table.

Customs are curious and formal at Episcopal suppers.

Ah, but the Southerners here. The Southerners here like our suppers barbecued. The most revered family meal for us has always been the Sunday barbecue picnic. We gather along long tables outside, preferably under a tin roof. We have our fill of everything from fried okra and fried chicken to coleslaw and cold iced tea.

You can still see these long tables outside of most any country church in Georgia. Those tables are the communion altars of the rural church. They are where true communion occurs.

Oh, I know that others in this room have other images of great communal meals. Maybe it's a lobster bake on the beach in Maine. Maybe it's a Midwest beef barbecue. Maybe it's a low country boil.

None of these meals looks like the first Last Supper, when Jesus shared a holy meal with his disciples, when he instituted what we call now "The Holy Eucharist." That common meal took place in some upper room in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and it looked completely different from our family and fellowship meals today. It looked completely different from the way we celebrate the Lord's Supper today in our various churches.

Except for one thing.

One element of Jesus' Last Supper is exactly the same in our present-day communal meals. It is this: Whatever the family, fellowship, or communion meal, we always eat with people who betray us.

As beautiful as the Last Supper looks to us in paintings and memories, Jesus knew that he was eating with his betrayers. I don't mean just Judas, though he is the one singled out. All of them would betray him, wouldn't they?

Why did Jesus go through with it?

Why didn't he just get up and walk out?

Listen to them squabbling and bickering about who is the greatest. Listen to those disciples worrying about who is going to be saved. Listen to them ask who it is who will betray Jesus. Is it I? Is it him?

"You imbeciles, it's all of you! All of you will betray me," is what Jesus could have said.

We hear too much anxiety about "breaking communion" these days. The real broken communion should have happened at the Last Supper. Why didn't Jesus break communion with them? He could have. He could have refused to eat with them.

But he didn't.

He stayed with them. He loved them to the end.

The title of this Holy Week preaching series is "The Scandal of the Cross." Amidst all the other scandals that constantly erupt in church life, I am supposed to speak on a special scandal, the scandal of the cross.

Well, for me, this is it. The scandal is that Jesus ate with people who were going to deny him, who were in the very process of betraying him, who might have even hated him.

The scandal is that Jesus forgives.

We would prefer to think of scandals in the same way our lascivious newspaper tabloids do. Scandals of the world sell a lot of copy.

But the scandal of Christianity doesn't always sell. The real scandal of God is that Jesus forgives.

The newspapers would love to have reported it this way: "Innocent Man Hauled Up on False Charges Finally Gets His Accusations Out." "I accuse, I accuse, I accuse." Those could have been the last words of Jesus.

The world is always looking for folks to blame. If something goes wrong, whose fault is it? And, guess what; it's always your fault. The last words of Jesus could have been, "Repent, for you are to blame."

But those weren't the words of Jesus on the cross. The words were, "Father forgive." "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What in the world has the Episcopal Church been doing in the last two years? If we listened only to what makes the headlines, we would think that the Episcopal Church is really just assembling accusations against one another. We've been storing up poison for each other. We've become a repository of resentment and accusation.

No, that's not it. Today, tomorrow, and the days after that, the words are different. They are truly scandalous. "Forgive. Forgive them."

The strength of the Christian Church has never been in how we accuse. The strength of the church is in how we forgive.

Forgiveness does not wait for repentance. True forgiveness does not wait for repentance.

Ultimately, the Church is centered in forgiveness. No other institution we participate in can give us forgiveness. Sure, there are plenty of good and generous institutions in the world. But few of those institutions are really about forgiveness. And

certainly the media, certainly the newspapers and television shows cannot give us forgiveness.

Consider what happens when we forgive. Well, when we forgive, we come back to life! The moment we forgive, we are somehow born again! Death is overturned! Forgiveness is the antidote to the poison all around us.

The moment we forgive. That's when Jesus displayed his most divine action. It's not just the Resurrection that reveals the divinity of Jesus. The most divine action of Jesus was when he forgave. That's when Jesus truly was freed from bondage. It was when he looked down from Calvary and said, "Father forgive them." That was when Jesus was truly raised from the dead: at the moment of forgiveness.

Some say the Church is close to death. Are we on the brink of falling apart? No, the Church will never fall as long as one activity survives. Our services and our suppers may look different from time to time. Our priests, deacons, bishops, and ministers may look different from time to time. Our altar tables look different from church to church, from generation to generation. But the Church will never fail as long as one activity survives; forgiveness.

As long as the Church is in the business of forgiveness, the Church is in business. And as long as a corporation forgives people, that corporation is the Church of Jesus Christ.

So, is the Church in crisis? At a turning point? A crossroads? Are we at the Cross? You bet we are. The Episcopal Church is always at the Cross. And whenever we are at the Cross, we are at forgiveness.

This is why God crosses us up with families. This is why God puts us in households. This is why God puts us in churches. So that we learn to eat with people who we disagree with, like Jesus did. We learn to eat with people who betray us. We learn to forgive. We learn actually forgiving others is more liberating than being forgiven ourselves.

Jesus knew this when he had supper with his community that night. Jesus knew this when he had communion. In God's kingdom, communion with one another is not a sign of perfection. It's not a sign that we have worked out every argument, and that now each of us agrees exactly with one another.

In God's kingdom, we eat together so that we can learn to love better, so that we can learn to forgive.

This is why breaking communion is perilous in the Christian Church. Breaking communion is a sign that we no longer want to forgive one another. Being unwilling to forgive is dangerous in the Christian Church.

This is why husbands and wives eat with one another even if they are having a disagreement. This is why parents prepare dinner for their children even when their children despise them.

Families and households learn this again at every Sunday night dinner. No matter how formal or informal the gathering, communities know this every time we eat together.

This is why churches invite all sorts of sinners to come share the Lord's Supper. This is why Jesus shared a holy meal with his friends -and his enemies""on the night before he was betrayed for us.

Lord, thou settest a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.

Holy Communion is not a sign that we've made it. The Lord's Supper is a sign that God forgives us even before we've made it. The Lord's Supper, every day, every year, calls us together so that we can forgive.

It's a scandal. It is a scandal that is the salvation of the world.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler

Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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