



HOLY THURSDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Brain Bantum, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator

I. The Historical Moment

Holy Thursday is also known as Maundy Thursday (or *le mandé*; Thursday of the *Mandatum*, Latin, commandment). The name is taken from the first few words sung at the ceremony of the washing of the feet, “I give you a new commandment” (John 13:34); also from the commandment of Christ that we should imitate His loving humility in the washing of the feet (John 13:14-17). The term *mandatum* (maundy), therefore, was applied to the rite of foot-washing on this day. Maundy (from Latin *Mandatum*), or Washing of the Feet, is a religious rite observed as an ordinance by several Christian denominations. John 13:1-17 mentions Jesus performing this act. Christian denominations that observe foot washing do so on the basis of the authoritative example of Jesus as found in the Gospel of John 13:1-15. The Bible records washing of the saint’s feet being practiced by the primitive church in 1 Timothy 5:10 perhaps in reference to piety, submission, and/or humility.



There are several names and the spellings of this practice, being variously known as *maundy*, *foot washing*, *washing the saints’ feet*. Its most common practice has been in

connection with the serving of the Lord's Supper which is generally practiced on Maundy Thursday. Among groups that do not observe foot washing as an ordinance or rite, the example of Jesus is usually held to be symbolic and didactic. Among these groups, foot washing is nevertheless sometimes literally practiced. First, some reserve it to be a practice of hospitality or a work of necessity. Second, some present it as a dramatic lesson acted out in front of the congregation.

The observance of *washing the saints' feet* is quite varied, but a typical service follows the partaking of unleavened bread and wine. Deacons (in many cases) place pans of water in front of pews that have been arranged for the service. The men and women participate in separate groups, men washing men's feet and women washing women's feet. Each member of the congregation takes a turn washing the feet of another member. Each foot is placed one at a time into the basin of water, is washed by cupping the hand and pouring water over the foot, and is dried with a long towel girded around the waist of the member performing the washing. Most services that include foot washing appear to be quite moving to the participants.

As context for Holy Thursday services, congregations are told in some way that on the night before Jesus was crucified, he shared a meal with his disciples. On that night, what the Church would come to call "Holy Thursday," followers of Christ were asked to "Take, eat. Do this in remembrance of me." With these words Jesus called his disciples to follow him in a new way, and following this night his disciples would continue to partake in a meal of thanksgiving and remembrance of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Early in the life of the Church this communal meal would become a vital aspect of the believer's fellowship with one another and with God. One of the earliest writings of the church, the *Didache*, highlights how central that Thursday night and that meal was:

We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your child, which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory, forever.

We thank you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you have revealed through Jesus, your child. To you be glory, forever.

As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.¹

II. Background and Significance

Holy Thursday celebrates Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion on Friday. Holy Thursday marks the decisive turn in Jesus' life and ministry as the expectations of his victory and kingship become reconfigured in this shared meal.

The aim of Jesus' presence, his identity as messiah and God's Son, begins to break through as he breaks bread and serves his disciples. But in the turning of expectations, Jesus' words to his disciples also display how such a reconfiguration becomes present in the disciples' own lives and ministries. Holy Thursday is the entry into a dramatic rhythm of Christ's salvific work and the patterns of Christian life as we perpetually enter into persecution, alienation, resurrection, and restoration of community. Holy Thursday marks not only the eve of Jesus' participation in the human condition of death, but also becomes an opportunity for our communities to enter into the rhythms of seeking the justification of our neighbor, of drawing them close, dying with, and being risen together through the Son of God.

In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus' final meal is closely associated with the Passover commemorating death "passing over" the homes of Israelites where God commanded the Israelites, saying:

On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exodus 12:12-13)

On the Thursday before his crucifixion, Jesus drew together the signs of this Passover meal, but drew them together upon his own body. In broken bread as his body and wine as his blood, Jesus began to point his disciples to the significance of what would come on Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. For these reasons, Holy Thursday is observed as part of Holy Week, recalling Christ's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his tragic death on Good Friday, and his miraculous resurrection on Easter Sunday. The Gospels and the subsequent letters of the disciples display the importance of this Thursday evening in the life of the church and the lives of those who believed in Jesus. In particular, two aspects of Holy Thursday would shape the life of the Church.

Jesus' Ministry

The Last Supper highlighted the culmination of Jesus' life with his disciples, making clear the radical nature of his ministry, and what he called his disciples to. In particular, Jesus' ministry highlighted the extent to which God desires to be with humanity, with Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Such an act was a profound culmination of the many radically everyday ways in which Jesus sought to be present with the poor, the destitute, and the outcast. In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God and God's desire to wash humanity, cleansing us of our unfaithfulness. Holy Thursday is the remembrance of Jesus' servanthood and the love for humanity that animated his desire to cleanse the aspects of our lives that are so often associated with what should be hidden and untouched.

The Lord's Supper

While Holy Thursday highlights the nature of Jesus' ministry and redefines the role of the priest, Holy Thursday also marks the institution of a central Christian practice, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion.

The communal meal shared that evening would become one of the central practices of the early church as they ate and drank in memory of Christ. After Christ's ascension the earliest followers would partake in this meal in their communal gatherings. The bread and wine were often part of a larger communal meal where believers would gather together to read the promises of Jewish Scriptures and the newer letters of the apostles, to pray, to sing, and to mutually uplift in a society that was hostile to this faith which had its roots in Judaism and was openly defiant of worshiping Caesar.

But as Christianity shifted from a persecuted faith to a religion sanctioned and supported by the empire, so too did the Lord's Supper's place in the community begin to shift. Discussion concerning the nature of the elements became more intense. Christians were asking, "What is the significance of this meal and Jesus words about it?"

The Lord's Supper was also referred to as Eucharist and was understood as a meal of thanksgiving intended to recall Jesus' life and death and resurrection. But as the church reflected upon Jesus' words and the Triune nature of God, an understanding of the words of institution, "This is my body . . . This is my blood" began to take on a deeper meaning for the church. How could this meal be understood to be Christ's presence?

There remains much disagreement in the church on how to answer this question—ranging from a true presence that transforms the elements to a purely symbolic presence. But in the midst of these disagreements the meal remains a central aspect of the life of the congregation and disciples in following Christ.

To understand the significance of the Lord's Supper's beginnings on Holy Thursday, there are important things to note. Through the communal meal, Jesus shifts the practices of cleansing (foot washing) and sacrifice away from the temple and into his own body. By telling his disciples that the bread and wine are his body and blood, Jesus is gathering the disciples into a temple of his body that will be rebuilt in his resurrected body only four days later.

Holy Thursday, in this context, is an opportunity to gather around the temple of Jesus' body. But even more, by partaking in a meal this gathering signifies the binding of Jesus to humanity and humanity's reception of God's gift to humanity, God's own body. In eating this meal together the congregation recalls the trepidation of Holy Thursday, the pain of Good Friday, and the exuberance of Easter Sunday. In all of these ways, the congregation enters into the truth that Jesus identifies with us and becomes present with us. The Lord's Supper signifies Jesus' solidarity with humanity!

This remembering and participation holds importance for every congregation. Theologian Shawn Copeland writes:

Eucharistic solidarity teaches us to imagine, to hope for, and to create new possibilities. Because that solidarity enfolds us, rather than dismiss ‘others,’ we act in love; rather than refuse ‘others,’ we respond in acts of self-sacrifice—committing ourselves to the long labor of creation, to the enfleshment of freedom.²

III. Making Holy Thursday a Memorable Moment

Holy Thursday is an opportunity for a congregation to reflect on the ways in which Jesus identifies with humanity, the ways in which he served and cleansed humanity, and the way he invites us to walk with him whether into difficult places or into places of restoration and joy. To make this a memorable learning moment congregations may:

- **Share a congregational meal on Holy Thursday, inviting those who may not have access to adequate food or shelter.** Be prepared to meet the needs of those who attend by at least having referral information available.
- **Hold a foot washing service on Holy Thursday with children, pastors, deacons, or elders serving as the washers.** It is not necessary that the feet of all present be washed, especially if there is a large crowd. Select persons can be chosen for this aspect of a worship service. These persons would be selected in advance and be prepared in advance. Always have children participate in any liturgical practice of the church. Select children to have their feet washed, and select older children who can assist in other ways in the foot-washing service.

You will need chairs for those whose feet are being washed, several pitchers of warm water (as each person is to have water poured over their feet) and several foot basins. Towels should also be provided for each person as their feet are washed. If you elect to have a small service, then only one pitcher of water is needed, along with several foot basins and towels. Water will be poured over each individual’s feet as the foot-washer moves from person to person. Remember, whether the ceremony is large or small, be sure to include children and youth.

- **Have your media ministry guide a period of prayer prior to the start of the service.** The media ministry can post directions through screen text or the church order of worship/bulletin for the church to begin a season of prayer, be it in the pews or at the altar. If possible, have your media ministry prepare looping slides or even worship videos of peaceful nature scenes such as running streams or flower gardens once the prayer period begins. Soothing worship videos during prayer are always effective.

- **Have your drama ministry prepare a skit that re-creates the scene in the lection Scripture, Matthew 26:17-30.** It is recommended that the script re-create the scene as it occurs in the Bible, rather than according to a playwright's personal perspective. The goal is to commemorate this significant event in Jesus' life and its importance to us and not to agitate, offend, or initiate controversy due to modern interpretation.

The following ideas are offered by Michelle Riley Jones, Lectionary Team Liturgist.

- **Outside the Service**
 - Set up a communion table OUTSIDE and invite passersby for prayer and to partake of the bread and wine. For those churches located in the suburbs with little "foot traffic," you can seek a permit to set up in a more heavily foot-trafficked area.
 - Family/Small Group Foot Washing. If congregational foot washing is not held, encourage families, in preparation for the service, to come together to wash each other's feet at home. Singles can also plan to meet in small groups prior to the meeting. Read John 13:1-5; Jesus washed feet to show his love. Have a bowl and paper towels or cloth towels ready. Take turns washing each other's feet and drying them as you express love to each other and testify of Christ's work in your lives.
 - Community Partnership. Identify ways your congregation can partner with a local resource for the homeless and needy. One example in the Washington, D.C. area is the Capitol Hill Group Ministry's—Shirley's Place. Shirley's Place is a daytime hospitality center that provides meals, showers, laundry, restroom, phone and computer services, along with other life skills services, to the homeless. Shirley's Place also provides a wonderful model for a church-based ministry. For more information about Shirley's Place, visit: <http://www.chgm.net/programs/services-for-homeless-families/chgms-headquarters-shirleys-place/>.

Have your congregation donate the following items and prepare small gift sacks that can be distributed to the needy: hand towel, bar soap, hand sanitizer, toothpaste, toothbrush, along with cards with local resource information.

Invite the community to "sit at the welcome table" by hosting an Agape Feast prior to the main service. Use the fellowship to find out the needs of your community and how your congregation can meet those needs.

IV. Songs for This Calendar Moment

Make Us One

by Carol Cymbala

Make us one, Lord make us one;
Holy Spirit, make us one.
Let your love flow
so the world will know
we are one in you.³

You Are the Living Word

by Noel Hall and Fred Hammond

Bread of Life
Sent down from Glory
Many things you were on earth
A holy King, a carpenter
you are the Living Word
Say it now

Bread of Heaven
Sent down from Glory
Many things you were on earth
A holy King, a carpenter
Cause you are the Living Word

Awesome ruler
Gentile redeemer
God with us the Living Truth
And what a friend we have in You
you are the leaving word

Jesus, Jesus
That's what we call you
Manger born but on a tree
You died to save humanity
You are the living word.

Cause you are the Living Word.

Jesus, Jesus
That's what we call you
Jesus, Jesus oh, oh

Oh, oh, oh
Ooooh, ooooh
You are the living word.⁴

Thou Lovest Me

by Josephine Delphine Henderson Heard

Gracious Savior let me make
Neither error or mistake-

Let me in Thy love abide
Ever near Thy riven side

Let me, counting all things dross
Find my glory in the cross;

Let me daily with Thee talk,
In Thy footsteps daily walk.

I would gladly follow Thee,
For Thou gently ledest me,

Where the pastures green doth grow
Where the waters stillest flow

For me is Thy table spread.
As Thou doest anoint my head

And my cup of joy o'erflows
In the presence of my foes.⁵

Notes

1. The Didache, or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, was a short letter written in the first or second century that was intended to guide Christians on the basic aspects of being a Christian disciple and how one ought to relate to the world. The Lord's Supper was a central aspect of this life of discipleship. Cyril Richardson, ed. Early Christian Fathers. New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing, 1970, 175.

2. Copeland, Shawn. Enfleshing Freedom. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 128.

3. Cymbala, Carol. "Make Us One." The Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir Live with Friends. New York, NY: Sony, 1991.

4. Hall, Noel, and Fred Hammond. "You Are the Living Word." Fred Hammond: Purpose by Design. New York, NY: Verity, 2000.

5. Josephine Delphine Henderson Heard (1861–1921), author of "Thou Lovest Me," was a teacher and poet. She wrote Morning Glories in 1890, a collection of seventy-two poems which, according to her preface, come "from a heart that desires to encourage and inspire the youth of the [African American] Race." "Thou Lovest Me" can be found in Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayer by African Americans by James Melvin Washington. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994.