

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, April 17, 2014
Maundy Thursday**

REMEMBER

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

For three years after his conversion, the man who would one day be the most important of all the apostles of Christ said and did nothing in public. Instead of immediately hitting the road to tell everyone about his stunning, life-changing experience on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus retreated to the desert and there he absorbed from the disciples all he could about the life, teaching, and resurrection of the Messiah whom he had met on that road, Jesus of Nazareth. Later when his mission to Gentiles bore a great deal of fruit, he in turn passed on to them what he had received from the Lord and what he had received from the Lord's apostles. One of the most important teachings he passed on had to do with worship and the celebration especially of what was called the *Eucharist*, a Greek word that means "thanksgiving," the sacrament of Communion with Christ. And writing to the Corinthians, Paul related in the briefest form we have in Scripture the events of that last supper. He said that when Jesus took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it and He said this: "This is my body," a phrase over which Christians have been arguing for centuries, and which we are not going to look at this evening. "This is my body which is for you," unequivocally indicating that this is not just for anybody who walks in off the street. This is for Christ's people. "Do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way, Paul then goes on, after the supper, which was a Passover Seder, He said this: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me." The assumption by scholars is that the cup to which He refers would have been either one of the four cups drunk in the course of Passover Seder or perhaps it might have been an extra cup that was meant to be separate, above and beyond those. By doing so, Paul tells them, you proclaim the Lord's death until the time when He returns to the world in glory. Remembrance and proclamation, that is what we are doing here this evening.

I want our focus for the moment to be on remembrance. To understand what Paul means by this, we need to go back behind the obvious meanings to be found in our English translations of this letter. Twice in this passage Paul uses a Greek word that, to tell you the truth, is inadequately translated in English "remembrance." I don't say that it's done inadequately because the scholars are not capable of finding a better word. The truth of the matter is that English simply doesn't have a word that conveys what the Greek word that's used there means. What *we* mean when we say "remembrance" is the calling to mind of thoughts or events or people or things that are past. For instance, we might remember a vacation that we took or our high school graduation, or the time we won a golf tournament or a chess tournament. I don't play golf. Maybe some of you have had that experience. Or an enjoyable day spent with a close friend. In each instance what we would be doing is thinking back on the past, on times that will not be repeated, at least not in the same way, and that we cherish as part of our personal history. That is not what Paul is telling us to do this evening. At least that's certainly not the most important thing.

That is perhaps a little bit of it, but that's not really what he wants us to do. The key to what he wants us to do is found in the Greek word "*anamnesis*." That's the word that the apostle uses to describe what happens at the celebration of Holy Communion. *Anamnesis* doesn't describe a subjective act of memory, something that exists only in our own heads. Rather, according to the Westminster Dictionary of Worship, it is an objective act in and by which a person or event commemorated is actually made present, is brought into the realm of the here and now. It's taking what is past and making it a present reality. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we aren't simply looking back to something that took place only in the distant past. We are joyfully proclaiming something that is taking place right now and right here, in the midst of this congregation, just as surely as it took place in Jerusalem twenty centuries ago. Jesus didn't just die two thousand years ago. His death continues today inasmuch as He continues to secure forgiveness for sinners by the power of His shed blood. See what I mean? It's not just about then. It's about now. His resurrection was not only for the first Easter morning, it is for *this* coming Sunday, and tonight as well, as far as that goes, inasmuch as the people of God are still being given the gift of eternal life by the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. And because He who was dead is alive and is alive forevermore, He continues to be present with us in this celebration of Communion. Not just in our memories, but just as truly as He was present with the disciples at the Last Supper. Not in the same form. Obviously we don't expect Him to come walking down the aisle and preside at the table. But He is nevertheless just as surely present tonight as He was then. In a few minutes you're going to see Helen and me at the table. The truth is that it is Jesus who is the Host of this supper. It is He that invites you to eat and drink with Him.

John Calvin affirmed this in his own inimitable way in the Institutes of the Christian Religion when he wrote, "Why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of His body – bread, wine – except to assure you of a true participation in it? But if it is true that a visible sign is given to us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us. I conclude," Calvin said, "that Christ's body is really, that is truly, given to us in this supper to be wholesome food for our souls." At least according to the founder of our branch of the Christ faith, this is not just a matter of looking backwards and remembering something that happened two thousand years ago. This is not simply a memorial. This is supper with our Lord.

Now this is a relatively simple idea but it's difficult for those of us who think in English to really get it, so I'd like to really make it clear. I want everyone here to close your eyes. I want you to think about the best food you've ever eaten, or the best thing that you have ever smelled, or the most beautiful music you've ever heard. Now recall that taste or that smell or that sound and really concentrate on it. Whether you're remembering chocolate dessert or a broiled lobster tail or an especially pungent rose or a favorite perfume or a Bach concerto or a hymn tune, I want you to focus on that so intently, if only just for a moment, that it becomes real. You can really taste that chocolate or smell that fragrance or hear that tune. Now let it go and open your eyes. We've all done that, right? We've all experienced the phenomenon that, for instance, a smell that we come across just in the course of daily life takes us back to a place that we haven't been for a long time and all of

a sudden we can smell the way it smelled in that other place. Remembering something so strongly that it seems like it's really happening again. We've all experienced that. Well, that's what *anamnesis* is like, except that in a mysterious, God-empowered and -directed sense that is impossible to define, what we bring to mind is real, as real in the moment that we remember it as it was when it first happened.

Here's another example that at least for me brings it even closer to home. The night that Jesus gathered with His followers in the Upper Room was, of course, no ordinary night. I've already mentioned that it was the time of the Passover that was celebrated three days ago by Jews around the world. It was a night of *anamnesis* upon which this one is based. Jesus and His disciples were observing the holy day through a ritual that is very similar to the one that is still observed today. Passover is a way of looking back and becoming part of the saving events of Israel's history. That becomes explicit at the point in the evening when it comes time to tell the story of the Exodus one more time. At that point, the youngest child, or the youngest adult if there are no children present, the youngest person at the dining table will ask the head of the household, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Notice, the question is not, "Why was *that* night different from all other nights?" speaking about the Exodus from Egypt. It's not a question looking back at something that happened back then and saying, "Wasn't what God did back then for our ancestors wonderful?" It's a matter of looking at what God is doing now and praising Him for what He is doing to bring us all out of our personal and relational and family Egypts.

In the most recent revision of the Passover service this comes out even more clearly, as Jews throughout the world speak of what God did to preserve the nation through the Holocaust, to reestablish the Jewish homeland in Israel, and of what He's doing even now to free Jews who are experiencing oppression in various parts of the world. God acted back then and He is acting now. That is what Jesus celebrated that Passover night with His disciples and it is what we come here this evening to celebrate. Tonight we do not gather to celebrate the good deeds or the wonderful teachings of a dead hero. The cup that we drink is not a toast to the memory of a martyr. We come, not to my table and not to your table and not even to the church's table. We come to the table of the crucified and risen Lord. It is His invitation to which we respond. It is for His generosity and His love and His sacrifice that we give thanks. It is for the work that He is presently doing in our lives that we offer our gratitude. It's for the mission of the proclamation of the gospel and service in the world that He is even now carrying out through us that we ask for His Spirit's power. He bids us to come to His table, remembering and thereby making real, right now, His death on the cross and His death for us, His resurrection from the grave and the new life that we live in Him.