

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

April 1, 2021 – MAUNDY THURSDAY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “RSVP”*

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14 (God instructs His people how to keep the Passover)
Psalm 116:1, 10-17 (The Lord hears our prayers and does much good for us)
1 Corinthians 11:23-32 (St. Paul explains the Eucharist as revealed to him by Jesus)
St. Luke 22:14-30 (Jesus institutes the Eucharist at the Last Supper)

This night, each of us has an invitation to meet Christ in the Upper Room. Often, invitations ask for an “RSVP,” an abbreviation from the French “*répondez s’il vous plaît*,” meaning “please respond.” I would like us to take a closer look at the “RSVP” in Jesus’ invitation. But since He didn’t speak French, I shall suggest some different words that each of the letters: “R-S-V-P” might represent.¹

The first letter, “**R**,” tells us this is a night of **remembrance**. It was the day on which Jesus and His disciples observed the Passover, the most important of all Jewish feast days, because it commemorated God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Specifically, Passover recalled the people’s miraculous exodus in which they escaped the angel of death. The Israelites who obeyed God’s command to “cover themselves with the blood of the lamb,” were “passed over” and were spared death.

This was God’s way of saving His people. Later, Christians would interpret the first Passover as a preview of the coming Messiah, Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, resulting in our eternal salvation.² Indeed, it is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ that we are freed, as dramatically as the Israelites who skipped through the divinely parted waters of the Red Sea as if they were on dry land.

On a night when those in the world drink to forget, we in the Church drink to remember. Drinking to remember is what we do in Holy Communion, it is the reason Christ instituted the Eucharist. In our lesson from First Corinthians, we heard how, on the night in which He was betrayed, Our Lord Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to His disciples to drink, saying, “this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this in remembrance of me.” We drink to remember all that Christ has done for us. **Remembrance** is the “**R**” in RSVP.

The second letter, “**S**,” has to do with **service**, and this comes from another word associated with Jesus’ last night. During the supper, He gave His disciples a mandate, or “*mandatum*” in Latin—from which we get the word Maundy. It was Jesus’ commandment to “love one another, as He had loved them.” In John 13:35 (NLT), Jesus says, “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” And in the third century, Tertullian [Apology 39.6], one of the early Church Fathers, recorded that when pagans encountered Christian communities, they would remark, “See how they love one another!”³

Because we Christians are to be known by our love—whether for friend and stranger, beloved or enemy—this leads to the letter “**S**,” for **service**. In order to show that love must be put into action, Christ knelt to wash His disciples’ feet; in that culture, this was the job of a slave or servant.

Jesus explains why He is doing this, as He says to them—and to us, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Self-giving love can become tangible with a basin and towel, or in a thousand other ways. But Jesus has given us the example of **service**.

The third letter, “**V**,” points to other qualities that shone in the Upper Room, that last night. We see humility, courage, and perseverance in our Master, who was determined to sacrifice His life for us. We witness loyalty on the part of Jesus’ disciples—and how easily it slipped away from Judas, who betrayed Him, and later Peter, who denied Him. Perseverance and loyalty give us the word that goes with the “**V**” in RSVP: **Values**. As Christians, we are to live out the **values** Jesus exemplifies, and to stand up for them courageously, even unto death, if necessary, as did our Lord.

The last letter, “**P**,” could be for “**penitence**”—the attitude with which we should approach Christ. Or it could stand for “**participation**,” because when we receive the Holy Eucharist, we participate in, we share in, Christ’s sacrificial death for us. It could also be about “**presence**,” the real presence of His Body and Blood, and the assurance that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. However, I’d like to suggest that “**P**” in “RSVP” refers to “**promise**,” to the promise that is ours in Christ’s new covenant, through God’s grace.

“**Promise**” is Jesus’ trustworthy assurance that we have been forgiven. It is a word grounded in hope. And tonight’s sacred meal, as a foretaste of Christ’s heavenly banquet, embodies for us the hope of the world to come, where there will be no more crying, pain, evil or death. In Jesus Christ, God has made an unbreakable promise to everyone who believes in Him.

St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 1:20 (NLT), “all of God’s promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding ‘Yes!’” That means, nothing on earth, in heaven or hell can dilute God’s promises of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

So, tonight, you have been issued a royal invitation from the King of Kings. It is an invitation to **remember**. An invitation to **serve**. An invitation to **value** perseverance and loyalty. And an invitation to affirm God’s **promises** in Jesus Christ. Tonight, from the Upper Room, Jesus invites you to come to the Table just as you are, no formal “RSVP” needed. Simply come, and receive. Drinking deeply of His mercy, grace, and love.

Amen.

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 5 April 2012.

¹ Adapt. Gene Thiemann, “Maundy Thursday Sermon: RSVP” 16 April 2003, via <gthiemann@ATTBI.COM>. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Teresa Ortiz, “The Passover Lamb and Jesus: How the Two are Connected,” Wryte Stuff.com, 13 March 2008 <<http://tortiz.wrytestuff.com/swa309316.htm>> 4 April 2012.

³ Adapt. “See how they love one another,” Regia Ecclesia, 10 July 2006 <<http://regiaecclesia.wordpress.com/2006/07/10/see-how-they-love-one-another/>> 4 April 2012.