

Sermon Maundy Thursday 2018 Year B

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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This Maundy Thursday evening is simply packed with significance in the Christian tradition. Some believe timing is everything and it certainly plays a role in our lessons tonight. The Passover celebration was the context for tonight's gathering of Jesus with his disciples and likely the many others who accompanied him as well. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) describe the last supper as occurring on the night of the Passover observance. The Jewish flight from Egypt is the basis of the annual Passover observance by faithful Jews. We draw a connection here with the OT lesson from Exodus of the flight out of Egypt. John's gospel tells the story from the perspective of the night before the Passover. In John's version, Jesus is the Paschal Lamb that would be sacrificed for us, just as the Passover lambs are sacrificed on the day of preparation. Regardless of which evening this was, at this final meal Jesus gives us the Eucharist as described in the passage from 1 Corinthians. In that passage, we heard Paul describing the reenactment of the Lord's Supper in continuity to the supper inaugurated by Jesus.

We hear these lessons year after year and yet they still have the ability to capture our attention. Like all bible study, each time we read and reflect upon scripture we can be surprised. Scripture can speak to us in new ways.

Take the gospel lesson. I was struck by how Jesus simply and disturbingly got up from the table and girded himself with a towel, poured water in a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. No introduction or explanation. I was always a little put off by Peter's abrupt attempt at controlling the narrative. But imagine if I had simply walked to the front row with a towel and basin and began to wash someone's feet? I venture to say that there would be a response. What are you doing? Wait a minute. Or worse perhaps.

The washing of feet is something that has taken me a long time to become comfortable with. Not until I was in seminary could I approach this as a recipient. I am much more comfortable washing the feet of others rather than having my feet washed. My feet aren't much to look at. Yours may not be either.

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” Jesus said to Peter. Ouch.

And following this, Jesus instituted the Eucharist. Jesus took the bread, blessed the bread, broke the bread and passed it around the table. Everyone probably handled the loaf and broke off a piece. Then Jesus blessed his cup of wine and then passed it around the table for everyone to take a turn.

I have been struck by the intimacy of both the foot washing and of the Eucharist. As Jesus' hour had now come, Jesus drew ever closer to those he loved.

As a culture, we are finally learning something of drawing close to our loved ones “when their hour has come as well.” But that wasn't always the case.

The intimacy of these passages reminded me of how care of the dying has changed over time. When I was in training, Elizabeth Kubler Ross' work and others were taking a hard look at how death was managed in hospitals. It had become institutionalized. One thing that was observed was that as someone was approaching death, they received less care and attention. It was as if the caregivers couldn't bear to be present. Health care workers didn't know how to sit or attend. A DNR order meant that you might be left alone and abandoned. Few deaths were actually witnessed, instead they were simply discovered. It was a grim time. Hospice and the movement around it has changed this. Now we draw closer, acknowledging that death comes to all of us. And we appreciate the sacred opportunity we are given if we can stay with someone at life's end.

I think that is how Jesus would like it. Because Jesus in the events of this evening gets intimate, personal, close. Jesus won't sneak away. No, he gets right out in front.

While our care for the dying is improving, in other ways we are becoming more distant, less intimate. There are several causes of this I think. In our obsession for creating safe environments we are moving in the opposite direction. Door locks. No touching. All in the name of safety. Technology also has a distancing effect. The ever available social media outlets exist at a distance. They are a form of electronic connection only.

But life as Jesus would have us live it involves vulnerability. As the social scientist Brene Brown has pointed out so clearly in her research, one thing we don't do well is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

On this evening, Jesus put aside all pretention, all formality, all distance between himself and those with him. Jesus broke down the barriers of social standing and decorum and drew close.

This freaked Peter out as it freaks us out in some ways today. Without instruction, Jesus got up from table and began to wash their feet. This was shocking. Peter wanted to understand before experiencing this. He wanted the intellectual explanation first. Don't we all? But Jesus says, just let go, experience. Don't intellectualize but experience, open yourselves to new possibilities. Experience a God who comes in service to love, touch, wash, feed, and care.

I experience something of our movement away from intimacy observing Episcopalians receiving the cup at the Eucharist. Over the years more and more people employ the action of intinction which is not a part of our Episcopal tradition. I don't know the origin, perhaps it has come out of our fear of infection or something. Yet, multiple studies point to the safety of sharing the common cup. But, actually practicing the common cup is becoming less common. Perhaps intinction is a sign that we can't bear the intimacy. Our desire to be safe and in control influences our sacred practices. I wonder what Jesus' perspective on our intinction is? Would Jesus say, "Unless you drink from this cup, you have no share in me?"

At a time in our culture when so much drives us apart, our withdrawing from one another and from Jesus must be quite distressing from God's perspective. But the lessons and meaning of this evening call us ever closer together. Jesus says I am among you as one who serves. "So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Tonight, we are reminded that loving God and loving our neighbor aren't cerebral activities. This isn't an intellectual enterprise. Rather this is intimate practice. The foot washing. The shared mea., take eat and drink. Serve one another. These actions remind us that we are tenderly cared for by God and intimately known. And we in turn are called to reach out and connect. This won't

be easy. So much in our culture argues against intimacy and vulnerability. But if we are to share the message of Jesus' love, we can't do that without connection. It isn't easy being a disciple of Jesus. The days ahead will remind us that it wasn't easy for Jesus either. Yet, together we can face the disconnecting nature of our culture. We can reach out and touch one another. We can maintain connection in the face of all that distracts us, that seeks to drive us apart. Then together as disciples of Jesus, having shown our love for one another and the world around us, the world may actually be changed.