

Maundy Thursday  
April 18, 2019  
Church of the Advent  
Rev. Ellen Richardson

### **Love One Another**

Tonight we come together to read from our scriptures, to say our prayers and to set our table for the Lord's Supper, remembering the story of the disciples gathering with Jesus after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. It turned out to be a much busier night for the disciples than they thought, looking forward merely to a holiday meal and an evening of rest away from the crowds that followed them everywhere. Jesus knew the night would unfold in ways more challenging and sinister than they could have imagined.

Every Maundy Thursday we, too, begin our liturgy by remembering that *first* Passover, the night God instructed Moses how he was to lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. The story from Exodus reads like a yarn told at a family reunion, meant to remind listeners of the significance of each thing that happened, of who did what and why: God's very specific instructions about the preparation of the meal of new lamb to be roasted whole, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, then eaten standing up with their shoes on, with no leftovers allowed. Then they were to smear a bit of the lamb's blood on the doorpost, which they could not have known was to protect them from a coming tide of destruction that would both punish and distract the Egyptians from the Israelites' escape, while every other firstborn in Egypt--human or animal--would die. The Israelites could also not have known that strange night marked the first--in 40 years of days and nights they would travel before they reached the land God promised them.

The disciples of Jesus were oblivious that their celebration of the Passover would be the last time they would share a meal with Jesus until he revealed himself after his Resurrection from the dead. They would not understand until much later that this night would be an inauguration night for a life-long journey for each of *them* into parts unknown.

Jesus, however, was *not* oblivious. He *did* know the importance of that Passover meal. He had already taught the disciples everything he knew to prepare them for their ministry in his name beyond their time with him. He knew at that point that all that *could be done had* been done to get them ready, and this last supper together was a kind of farewell dinner, though Jesus

was the only one—besides Judas who was about to betray him—who understood that he would soon be gone. So he spent the evening expressing his love for his friends, washing their feet, feeding them with the Bread of Life, offering them wine as his own blood, soon to be shed for them and for the whole world, offering them strength for the hard road of sacrifice that lay ahead of them, even though it would take some hindsight for the disciples to understand it all.

From the Latin *mandatum*, Maundy means *mandate* or *command*.

In the face of all that he knew was to come, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another. On one level, Jesus, who had lived with these guys for going on three years, might have come off a bit like a parent addressing squabbling siblings, "Be nice to your brother!" So Jesus did something attention-getting to demonstrate the length to which they should go to show their love for one another. He got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel. He took on the job of a servant, washing away the dirt, the weariness, and the stress of the long road they had been on together, preparing them for the longer road still ahead. This was a show of love that went way beyond being *nice*. This was a love about *sacrifice*—about being willing to go to the wall—even to death—for those who would not necessarily do the same in return, including one who would betray him, and another who would soon deny him in a heartbeat to save his own skin.

To Peter, this just wasn't right. Jesus on his knees performing the act of a servant just got all over him and he wasn't having any of it. To Peter, this was not a demonstration of love but a sign of indignity and degradation. "You will never wash my feet!" he said. But then Jesus, in that Jesus sort of way, changed Peter's mind. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Peter was challenged to accept the fullness, the wholeness, of Jesus, which included his sacrifice, his servanthood, his unconditional love and forgiveness--all of which went against Peter's expectations of how a Rabbi and leader should act. But he went along saying, "Lord not only my feet but also my hands and my head." Peter went for it, not realizing that it would only be a matter of hours until he was denying he even knew Jesus—three times. Jesus knew this was coming--and even told him so--and still he washed his feet. And when Jesus was done, he got

up, sat at the table, blessed the bread, broke it and gave it to them as said, "Take, eat, for this is my body." And then he passed the wine and loved them to the end.

Loving one another is something that seems to be open to interpretation these days. We prefer the option of loving just those who qualify for our love by seeing the world the way we do, those who share the same DNA (sometimes), those who make our life easier, those who make us feel safe and secure. If there are those we *don't* love in this world, we convince ourselves that they are unlovable and unworthy of our affection either because of transgressions--past, present or anticipated in the future--or sometimes just for who they are. Our fear of others and our anxiety about our self-preservation has narrowed our world view so much that we are left struggling to cross bridges that have grown unstable over time. Loving one another just seems so complicated, and so challenging, that we need to be reminded now and again that for followers of Jesus, it is not optional; it is a command.

What if we could hear this command of Jesus in a new way---that was less overwhelming, possibly even an occasion for joy? If acting like Jesus seems impossible, what if we could just take some steps in his direction? What if loving another means finding a way to really listen to someone whose way of looking at the world is different from ours? Could loving one another be as simple as giving someone else a break, lowering our expectations of perfection from time to time? What if loving one another means expecting *more* of someone than they expect of themselves, and finding a way to communicate that, or just showing up to support them, even when we don't feel like it, because our presence could make a real difference to them. And what if loving one another is about washing someone's else's feet, or practicing humility and vulnerability by offering our own feet to be washed by someone else? God loves unconditionally, and we are not God, but most of us could still stretch our capacity to love one another a little bit beyond the comfort zone we live in now.

This night, which enfolds the rich promises of the Passover into the remembrance of the Last Supper where Jesus gave the commandment to love one another, is celebrated just once a year; but we are meant to carry its rich lessons throughout each year, each lifetime, for each Christian. The most important takeaway is that following Jesus is less about what we *believe*,

much less about what we *say we believe*, and more about what we *do because of our belief*, with and for one another. Jesus did not just *tell* us how to do this; he *showed* us, in the breaking of the bread and in getting down on his knees to become a servant of all. Perhaps at least on this one night, we can reaffirm our desire and intention to do these things in memory of him. Amen.

