



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020
Sermon: "Transformed by Love"
Gospel Text: John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Over the years of my travels, one of the things that I have collected is Russian lacquer boxes. Tiny highly polished black boxes of various shapes with intricate hand painted miniature designs usually depicting folktales. These boxes are painstakingly created, taking 45 days just to get them ready to paint. By the time the work is finished, there are layers of paints and up to 10 layers of clear polished lacquer on top of it all.



My favorite and best box depicts a fairytale princess. She is beautifully adorned, elaborately and regally dressed with robes and a gold crown. It's only when you look in the corner that you see the skin of a frog. The box tells the story that she had been turned into a frog and liberated and restored by a prince to be the princess she really was. Transformed by love.

But as for the lacquer box itself, its truth is less elegant. Beneath the 10 layers of lacquer, the gold and the paint is the starting sketch. Beneath that is black lacquer and primer. Under all of that is the actual box- just thin layers of cardboard. Beneath all of that façade its truth is quite ordinary, unimpressive, even fragile stuff barely held together by glue and a lot of artifice.

And it got me to thinking about our "selves" as we usually present them to the world. The layers we wear, the postures we take, the stories we tell are

like so many layers we add on over time to create who we present to the world. Some of those layers are good, and some not so good. Some we have put upon ourselves and some put upon us by others.

In the season in which we find ourselves, some of those layers have started to fall away. On the surface it may just be what our hair looks like, maybe a little deeper about who we associate with. What about what fills our days? Who are we without sports, or activities, our reputations, our accomplishments? Who are we when we cannot buy whatever we want, or go wherever we want? Who are we when the stories we normally tell or the status we usually embody is no longer covering us as we walk?

After that Passover meal, Jesus starts removing the layers- He starts with the layers of clothing, the things that identify him as a rabbi, until he is stripped down to just a loincloth. Then begins to serve, to perform an act of humility, in the washing of feet, removing the layers on the feet of others. I wonder whose quiet serving in our world should be so elevated their story gets told every year? Tonight, we encounter Jesus beginning this loving and transforming.

But Peter isn't having it. Never!
I wonder what bothers him more-
Is that Jesus is so self-effacing, that this is beneath him?
Or is it that Peter feels suddenly so vulnerable?
This act of Jesus catches him off guard in a way he doesn't want to be seen, perhaps not even by himself.
Jesus cleansing his feet, practically speaking is soothing the aches and pains Peter might normally just power through. Just as much as it is a sign of washing away everything that the cross will complete. And I imagine Jesus looking at Peter with eyes of knowing love.
Eyes that hold all that has happened, and all that will.
Looking right into his soul. That's about as vulnerable as it gets.
Not to chastise, but to love.

One of the hallmarks of our current time is that we find we really are all so vulnerable. Life and death, fears of scarcity and uncertainty that we cannot quite control are closer companions than we would like. Much of our life as we craft it has been stripped away. Sometimes that feels liberating, but as often sometimes unnerving.
Here too Jesus comes to us in love.
Jesus coming to the suddenly "unvarnished sometimes barely holding it together" disciples like you and like me. Jesus meeting us knowing everything we have been and could be. Jesus enacting the gospel this day "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the very end." Loving completely, loving to the utmost, no matter what our stripped-

down selves look like. In spite of all of the layers that have perhaps obscured our best selves.

Jesus is reaching out to us just as we are inclined to pull away and say we don't need this. But oh, we surely do.

Jesus doesn't limit this love to just a self-effacing act of service on one night. The fullest extent of his love is not just washing some feet. Jesus shows where love will go.

It's death on the cross. For us and for all time.

Being willing to die for another.

Some of the biggest questions these days in our lives are what will life look like from here?

As we imagine staring at our reflection in the water with Jesus, will we decide that some things we thought mattered, in fact do not and that we can let them wash away?

Will we hold onto the deepening of our faith that has been for many the wellspring that sustains us these days?

Or decide in better times we don't need it?

Will we continue to set aside our lives for others in the ways that so many are doing right now because we see how vital life itself really is?

Or return to seeing people as we once did?

Will we love God and one another more deeply because we know how hard it is to feel incomplete sometimes due to the distance?

How might Jesus speak to us about loving so fully? I hope we don't turn away. I hope we let Jesus show us where love will go.

These days, there is much I miss about how we usually gather around these words. Yet, in some ways for me this year the gospel feels more alive than ever- perhaps it is the urgency of it, perhaps it is that as much as I love all of the pageantry and beauty of our traditions, without them, one thing stands out.

What has not died- the one thing that won't- the power of the love of Jesus Christ.

In the gospel of John, Jesus' last public words in ministry were these: "My Father who has sent me has commanded what I should say and I should speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life." It's the embodiment of love.

In service to that command, Jesus gave his life. This side of the cross, we know our loving Savior rose to redeem us. Perhaps this year we will ponder what parts of our lifestyles can die so that we can be transformed by his love. And to share in where love goes in all its vulnerability, and beauty to live authentically and completely in service to God's command. Amen.