



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

Maundy Thursday: April 18, 2019

Sermon Title: "Love to a New Degree"

Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

When I served a church in the inner city, where so many struggled with food security, we started a Wednesday night meal and worship called Table Church. It was a simple concept- bring a munchie, bring a friend and we gathered following our free afterschool tutoring program for the day had ended. It took off and attracted lonely seniors, sociable neighbors and increasingly a huge share of the afterschool kids. And the meal was a chaotic combination of Wawa free leftovers we picked up, a lovely casserole or two in Longaberger baskets and 3 buck chickens from Wal Mart that a guy named Earl learned about- after four hours the rotisserie chickens can't be sold and Earl scored these primo eats with glee. There was both a peaceful joy at then sharing in communion together with candles and prayers. But there was also a tension as more and more kids showed up, these pushy kids were testing the limits of "who should be there at the Table."

We all can be little children, as Jesus calls the disciples. Pushy, unruly and immature. Impatient, and bratty to one another. Our capacity to share a meal demonstrates how we are either joined together or separated. The kids jostling to eat first, uncomfortable with the grace it takes to sit close were a vivid reminder that our lives at the table can be sticky and trying as we share the substance of life. Little children, I give you a new command.

Eugene Peterson writes of this passage that Jesus is the "God Revealer."

What is revealed is that of all the commands Jesus might have made- believe I am the Messiah; memorize Scripture; take a stand in the world; wear a cross; even "eat this bread and drink this cup" is not the command we are given.

John, the ever ethereal, mystical John, is suddenly vividly clear.

“Love one another.”

Love beyond what is convenient, or feels right. Love beyond just the times it pleases us, or feels justified. That is a whole lot harder to do when we are bumping up against each other than it is to love an unknown person half way round the world. Love is the defining feature of God, and the charism of Jesus’ followers. Our union with Jesus will be revealed in our ability, our capacity, to show love to one another. John Wesley spoke of this command as “love to a new degree.” That degree, Jesus says, is to the degree he has loved us.

It’s more than just putting up with- it is loving deeply.

How deeply you ask?

As deep as stripped down and on hands and knees washing feet.

It is spoken to Jesus’ community of believers that today we call the church.

This command is spoken not on some symbolic level of loving generically.

It is spoken in our “word made fleshiness” world. Perhaps that’s why Will Willimon once joked the problem with loving people here in the church is that Jesus is notoriously non-selective- calling us to love everyone Jesus drags in here.¹ But we shouldn’t be surprised.

This is the same Jesus who makes good wine for those already drunk, who talked to THAT woman, fed the unprepared, defended the sinner and healed the son of the officer in the army that occupied his country by force.

Now Jesus speaks to those who have not been the easiest to stick with. Remember that across the gospels his disciples are shallow and self-centered, insecure, slow to get it, and awkward. If their sandals could tell the stories of where the disciples have been, boy could they talk.

And we know the story from here, where they will falter, and flee, and forget, the story Jesus knew would be.

How on earth does Jesus bow low and wash these feet? The feet of those who will be his enemies actually. What a despicable thing to have to do.

Sometimes when people talk to me about “church” they tell me they are “spiritual, but not religious,” or “I love the church, just not the people.” Can’t we just be spiritual without the messiness of one another? Having to put up with the despicable feet of one another? Maybe there was a terrible fight at church, or maybe I was offended, or wounded or ignored. And I didn’t want to go back.

¹ Will Willimon, *Thank God It's Thursday*.

But little children, our Lord is not encouraging us to turn faith in God into our own private journey to “my best life.” Or source of private consolation.

And Jesus isn't calling us to mitigate and soften this message to make God whatever is practical and helps us. but never disturbs us. And in our hearts we know how we feel about ourselves. “I don't want you to see my real feet, and my real life, the parts that might seem to make me unlovable. Can't you just let me keep my feet to myself?”

In part, Jesus reveals whose feet I don't want to imagine Jesus washing and loving.

Jesus also comes to reveal God in all of the people and places and moments where sin has the capacity to separate. But in God's, we are joined. We are all God's little children.

That's when this story brings me to my knees. Because Jesus speaks into our world a new word: “Let me love you. You need to be a part of this. And this water and this table are more than you think.”

And I for one am sure that if anyone else's heart other than God's was in charge, where would I be? Or you? Or any of us?

Jesus reveals God's heart not to condemn, but to save us with “out of the ordinary but absolutely necessary love.”

This love is an act of will, and a gift Christ promises to give that is enduring. To the end, to the cross.

Jesus came, John tells us, and the world did not recognize him. How often still. But Jesus comes to reveal God's grace and truth and take away the sin of the world, all that separates us- so we can recognize God's love for ourselves and one another.

And in this water and table we remember we are loved to the very end and then given our basin and towel in a world of dirty feet. Our job is to love people without stopping to inquire whether they are worth it. (Thomas Merton)

It's love to a new degree with the power to save.

While we struggle with all that this love imperative means, perhaps we can start by remembering the imagery of this night and this story from St Jerome:

That in his final years, the once eloquent St John was reduced to simply repeating one phrase over and over-

“My little children, love one another.”