

A Meditation for Maundy Thursday

April 28, 2024

Friends in faith, siblings in Christ, let's begin this time of reflection in a spirit of prayer:

O God, here we are, gathered together this evening.

We need to be reminded of and comforted by your ever-present love.

And we need to be challenged by Jesus' teachings and model of love.

So open our imaginations to new ways to love like Jesus.

Send your Spirit to stir our hearts and our minds, empowering us toward deeper and wider love. Amen.

Fellow sojourners along the path of Holy Week, **with whom was Jesus talking on that evening long ago** – that evening in the second-floor room he had borrowed in order to celebrate the Seder meal? Jesus was one among thousands who had made that annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover, the celebration of the liberation of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt.

Jesus had gathered with his closest circle of disciples. They were his closest friends, yet he was also their rabbi and they his students. They were enjoying a festive meal, with the familiar, beloved rhythms of sacred storytelling. And several of those disciples also form the audience within the narrative of the Garden of Gethsemane, which Pat and Fritz will share later in the worship service. That reading will transport us to a different moment and place later the same evening. I wonder how Jesus' tone and affect shifted throughout that night.

For now, we linger with them at table. Within the safety of deep friendship, Jesus risked shifting the tone from festive and relaxed to introspective and serious.

I challenge us to each wonder: **what is Jesus saying directly to you this evening?** But before we explore how Jesus words to his closest disciples speak to us today, let's examine the sense the gospel writers had of Jesus' spiritual posture.

"He had always loved his own in this world, but now he showed how perfect this love was. During supper, because Jesus knew that God had put all things into his own hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God..."

Jesus showed his disciples and his critics over and over how to love others amidst many layers of commonality and difference. How about those words? *"He knew that God had put all things into his own hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God."* Maybe we have imagined that aspect of Jesus whereby God had put all things into Jesus' own hands as a characteristic of Jesus' divinity that is far removed from us. Maybe we have believed that our God – and Jesus, as a definitive incarnation of God's love – can control all things with divine hands.

What if having all things in their hands means not a power to absolutely control but a power to absolutely love? What if following Jesus in the practice of love means trusting that you have come from God and will return to God, and that God has empowered your own hands, feet, intellect, soul to love all beings?

One of the most helpful articulations of that substance of faith that I've come across comes from a Thomas Merton scholar and retreat leader by the name of James Finley. Finley stakes this claim: *"If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love."*

Jesus taught and modeled a spiritual posture of courage and tenderness. **How is your spiritual posture these days?** Are you open to embodying more courage and tenderness inside and outwardly?

How is your experience of trust these days? Do you trust that the absolute love of God empowers you to *“face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love?”*

Do you long to grow and deepen in your capacity to act with courage, tenderness and love?

Let's listen again to a few of Jesus' words on that evening long ago. Let them wash over you, speaking God's urgent love into your being. And welcome feelings of recognition of relationships in which you need to trust God (meaning Love) more completely and practice love more courageously.

Jesus says to us, *“Any who have taken a bath are clean all over and only need to wash their feet.”* Friends, we are all clean, we have all experienced God's saving, restoring love breathing life into our relationships. **Yet, in what relationship are you moving with dirty feet? Which is that relationship that is calling you to more humility, integrity and grace?**

Jesus says to us: *“Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Sovereign,’ for so I am. If I—your Teacher and Sovereign—have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done for you.”*

In what relationship could you give more of your heart and body energy as Jesus did, kneeling down on a hard floor, washing his friends' dusty feet so that they would feel his love.

Who needs to be reminded of your love by feeling it – through your hands, your voice, your eye contact, a written note? May we welcome uneasy feelings as we recognize those relationships in which you need to trust God's love more fully and embody God's love more courageously and tenderly.

Jesus says to us: *"I give you a new commandment: Love one another. And you're to love one another the way I have loved you. This is how all will know that you're my disciples: that you truly love one another."* It is sometimes said that we ought to practice what we say – that our actions need to match our words. **What sort of behavior have you professed that the world needs but not consistently embodied through your own behavior?** I urge us to ask God for strength in the coming days – strength in our convictions – so that we will faithfully make our actions and words match the Word of God in our hearts.

Jesus says to us: *"Earthly rulers domineer over their people. Those who exercise authority over them are called their 'benefactors.' This must not happen with you. Let the greatest among you be like the youngest. Let the leader among you become the follower."* I invite you to close your eyes for a moment if you're comfortable doing so. **Let the image of a child whom you love come and enter now into your mind's eye. Make sure it is a child who has shown you love. Focus on that child's particular way of being and let it fill your heart. How is that child uniquely wonderful? Jesus is asking you to follow the example of that child's greatness.**

Later this evening, Jesus says to us, *"Asleep, Simon? Could you not stay awake for even an hour? Be on guard and pray that you not be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* In times of great stress, we are vulnerable to temptation. When we are stressed, our willingness to love more fully is compromised.

With whom do we need to be on guard to demonstrate care more generously, even when stressed? For the love of whom do you need to pray that God will embolden your spirit and put you on guard to love at all times?

A contemporary sibling in faith, Matt Laney (a contributing writer to our United Church of Christ's Daily Devotional) wrote this for today: *"There are days I wish Jesus hadn't said that. Why not stick with the part about loving God, who, let's face it, is much easier to love. How could Love not be loved? People on the other hand... In order to love them, I first have to know them, hear their stories, feel their joys and pains, put up with their issues. I guess that's why Jesus made it a commandment rather than a suggestion. Tall order, especially on the eve of Good Friday when we remember just how low humanity can go... Truly, Maundy Thursday is a mandate for change, a mandate to do the hard and holy work of showing up and loving people as Jesus did even when, especially when, humans were at their worst."*

Let us (individually and as a community) follow Jesus in embodying the courageous, tender love of God, today and in all the days to come. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Maundy Thursday (March 28, 2024)
St. Croix United Church, Bayport
A tapestry from John 13: 1–15, Luke 22: 15–27, John 13: 33–35,
Mark 14: 32–42