

Maundy Thursday, RCL, All Years

April 9, 2020

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

1 Cor. 11:23-6

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Psalm 16:1, 10-17

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, St. John's Episcopal Church,
West Hartford, CT

Acts of Love and Humility

Last night was the beginning of Passover. The most holy night for Jews all over the world. Sequestered in their homes like everyone they are reenacting the time in Jewish history when God rescued the ancient Hebrews and delivered them out of bondage in Egypt. In preparation for their escape they marked their door posts with the blood of the lamb as a sign for the angel of death to pass over and to spare their first born from death on the eve of the Exodus. Passover is a celebration of freedom – freedom to love and worship the one, true living God.

This is the festival that Jesus and his disciples, as faithful Jews, will soon celebrate as they gather in an upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus has entered this holy city for the last time. The crowds that once welcomed Jesus like a royal king in a grand procession, covering his pathway with palms just a short time ago, are now vying for his blood like a common criminal. The disciples can still hear the terrifying shouts of “crucify him, crucify him” still ringing in their ears.

Tonight it is no surprise that the disciples are filled with anxiety and fear. Three times Jesus has told his inner circle of friends that he must die and be raised. Of course, no matter how many times Jesus repeats this they can't possibly know what he is talking about. How could they? Their idea of a Messiah was one who fights and triumphs over their oppressors; not one who would passively surrender to the local authorities and occupying rulers and willing go to his death.

Following Jesus' instructions they prepare a common meal in an upper room. Afterwards, Jesus takes off his cloak, wraps a towel around his waist, kneels down and begins to wash the disciples' feet. Jesus has taken on the role of a lowly household servant or slave. Certainly, this is not the role performed by a revered teacher or rabbi. Peter is outraged at the thought that Jesus would humiliate himself in this way. He refuses to take part. Jesus explains that this is necessary if they are to follow him. Then, Jesus proceeds to wash every one of his disciples' feet, including the feet of Judas, the one who would betray him that very night.

Jesus' action reveals a love that is not of this world. A love revealed in simple acts of kindness and service to others. A love so gentle, so pure, so inclusive, it can only come from God, the Holy One. Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that they are to do likewise. *"A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another. 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" (John 13:35).¹

Tonight our reading from John's gospel invites us to lean deep into the mystery of Holy Week. The narrative of Jesus' last week on earth seems all the more intense and all the more real because we are living with the frightening reality of the COVID 19 pandemic. The fears and anxiety that we are all experiencing draws us closer to what the disciples were going through when they gathered together with Jesus in the upper room. They were not facing a pandemic but, much like us, they were filled with anxiety and fear, having no idea what awaited them. One thing they did know is there would be suffering, loss and death as Jesus had told them. And, we await the same.

To prepare the disciples for his departure from this world Jesus uses the short time he has left to show them what it means to truly love one another. Jesus' silent sermon of foot washing reveals the true mission of the Church, giving of ourselves in love and service to others.² This is the very thing that is going to get us through this global health crisis. Acts of love and service to one another.

Since this nightmare of the coronavirus began I am amazed and inspired when I read about the men and women who are stepping up to the challenge and doing what they can to see us through this pandemic. They are using their skills, gifts and resources doing exactly what Jesus taught us; to love one another with acts of service with deep humility. Our medical professionals, first responders, those who provide essential services to keep our country running – they are each taking incredible risks to save the lives of complete strangers. From several parishioners I have heard heartwarming stories of neighbors and friends looking out for one another in a way they have never done before. Many folks are making face masks at home to donate to health care workers who must work without adequate supplies. Local restaurants are donating and delivering meals to feed hospital workers. Hotels and college dorm rooms are being used to house the homeless. Right now the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City is being converted to a temporary hospital to provide care for 400 patients.

Through incredible acts of selfless love and service to others, we are rediscovering our human connection to one another. We are reminded in powerful and often heartbreaking ways that we are responsible for each other. If nothing else this pandemic has awakened us to love as Jesus taught us when he got on his knees and washed his disciples' feet the night before he died. You and I are called to do the same, to love one another. The world will long remember how well we chose to treat each other in this crisis. A passage I found the other day says it best.

"And then the whole world walked inside and shut their doors and said, "We will stop it all. Everything. To protect our weaker ones. Our sicker ones. Our older ones." And nothing in the history of humankind ever felt more like love than this."³

¹This is where the name "Maundy" comes from; the Latin word of *mandatum*, or "commandment."

² Trygve David Johnson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, (Westminster: Louisville, 2010), p. 276.

³ Freedhearts.org.

Amen.