

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, April 14, 2022

The thing that strikes me most about this last night of Jesus' life is the intimacy of it. Jesus and his disciples go to an upper room where they prepare to celebrate the Passover, the most important festival of the Jewish religion. We don't know exactly who was there, besides Jesus and the Twelve but probably a few others. The beloved disciple for one. The women were probably there, too, but serving the food, as was the custom. But these were his intimate friends and followers. The ones who had been with him all along. Jesus knew the end was very near and he wanted to share this meal with them before he died.

There they are, sitting at the table together, and Jesus gets up before the meal and washes their feet, such an intimate action. I imagine him lovingly removing sandals and washing feet, carefully and gently drying them. Looking up into their eyes and smiling. Have you ever washed anyone's feet? It's a very intimate, loving act, and Jesus does this for his friends. And he tells us to do it for each other. I love doing this and giving you the opportunity to do it, too. I'm sorry Covid prevents it again this year.

Then they eat the Passover meal and Jesus takes the bread and shares it among them, saying it is his body which is given for them. He shares the wine, his very lifeblood, he says. And he tells them to do this, whenever they gather, to remember him. Eating and drinking together is an intimate act, something one normally does with family and friends. But Jesus gives us even more. He says he is sharing his very life with us in this meal, and when we share it with each other in the ages to come, we are sharing his very life, with him and with each other.

They linger over the meal, as is proper for the Passover, and Jesus shares some of the most beautiful teachings found in the Bible. He tells us to love one another. To love one another the way he has loved us, deeply, intimately, completely. He tells us that it is by our love that everyone will know we are Jesus' people. He promises that his Spirit will come and live within us and will never forsake us.

And it is at this meal that Jesus opened up a bit more and spoke much more clearly about who he is and what he was asking of them and promising them. We see this in the next 4 chapters of John's gospel. That's where Jesus tells his disciples clearly that he and the Father are one, that if they have seen him, they have seen the Father. This is when he tells them about the Holy Spirit, who will help them understand and remember all this in the time to come. This is where he prays for them, for God to protect them and watch over them. And promises that God will dwell in us. He is so tender, so caring, like a parent sending his little ones off away from home for the first time.

All of this is so tender, so intimate and loving, the way a man or a woman might be with their closest friends or family. And all along he knows that Judas will betray him and the others will run away and abandon him and Peter will deny that he even knows him. He knows all these things about his friends and yet he still washes their feet and shares the bread and wine, his very life, and his last teaching with them. He still loves them.

This time sharing the Passover meal is an oasis of peace and calm and love after the fanfare of the Triumphal entry, the conflict in the Temple when he overturned the money changers' tables, all the public debates and traps, and before the final chaos breaks loose that very evening and Jesus is arrested and it all seems to fall apart. He wanted this time, needed this time, this time of peace and closeness, to catch his breath and to share his love with those who were closest to him, to support them and also to be supported by them. He needed this time and he knew they would also need it before facing the time ahead of them.

This is exactly what Jesus invites us into as well. He invites us to share this time with him, too, not just by reading about it, but also whenever we gather, as we do, for worship, he promises to be there in our midst. We enter into it when we share the bread and wine with each other, the bread and wine which becomes for us the body and blood of Jesus, his very life, which he still shares with us.

Our lives hold plenty of struggle and chaos, whether we are still working or whether we are dealing with health issues or just figuring out the latest Covid news, or whatever it is. Our lives are busy, probably too busy. They're stressed, sometimes anxious. Or perhaps they're not busy enough and we are facing loneliness and a loss of meaning. Either way, Jesus invites us into this intimate oasis of peace and love that we share whenever we gather together for worship and share the bread and wine, the very life of Jesus. This is time to rest with Jesus and be refreshed before we have to go out again and face whatever it is that's in front of us.

This is time to allow ourselves to be served by Jesus and by one another. To simply abide in him and let him abide in us. A time to love one another, even though we know each other intimately after so many years and are well aware of each other's faults, as Jesus was that last night, as he still is. But it doesn't matter. He still loves us, still serves us and invites us still to love one another and serve one another and to share his life with one another.

I'm glad that we are here, together, tonight. I'm glad that we have been gathering all week together, sharing this time, facing this time of sadness together. And I'm glad that we gather week by week for a time of peace and rest and refreshment in the midst of our lives, whatever may be going on in them. We need this time together with Jesus to prepare us to face the rest of our lives as Jesus' faithful and loving followers. And you know, when we do spend this time together, then we can face whatever challenges may come, just as Jesus did and just as his disciples did.

That night unfolded unexpectedly for the disciples and Jesus, when they went from this peaceful upper room to the peaceful garden of Gethesemane, where Jesus liked to go when he was in Jerusalem, for prayer and reflection. Instead of peace, they found soldiers, there was confusion and chaos, panic, the disciples ran away, Jesus was arrested and their world fell apart. We re-enact this when we strip the altar and end this service in darkness and silence. We leave in disarray. Tomorrow we will remember the events of Good Friday when we see that Jesus found the strength to face his enemies with love and forgiveness. May we, too, be strengthened by this intimate time of communion with Jesus, whatever may come after that.