

Maundy Thursday C 2016

The people of God were getting ready. They were getting ready for a special feast—the feast of the Passover when every Jewish household would be gathering for a special meal during which they would eat the story of their own identity as a people of God. They would hear again the story of their deliverance from slavery. Even though it had happened long ago, it was their story. It had happened to them, too. So, they needed to be in the story. It was about them. They would be getting together to taste the story of how God had brought them from the bitter labor of slavery and salty tears, through the scary waters of the Red Sea and finally into the land of freedom and promise.

When Jesus gathers with his disciples, it was the day before the feast of the Passover. It was the day of preparation and getting ready. Everyone was out doing their shopping, cleaning house and setting the table. Lambs were being rounded up and prepared for roasting over the open fire so they could be served with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

Now, on the night of his betrayal, before the festival of the Passover, while Jesus was at supper with the ones who had followed him and stuck close by him all this time, he, as their friend, Lord and Master, “took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,

This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me.

After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:

This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.

Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns.”¹

What were they all thinking that night at the table? What was this mysterious and strange thing that Jesus was doing and saying? Did it make them feel afraid of an impending danger to his life? What is this saying of St. Paul? “For as often

¹ 1 Cor 11:23-26 The Message

as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”²

On this same night, at some point, Jesus did another strange thing the disciples didn't understand. He got up from the table and washed their feet. Why was he, their Teacher and Master, acting like the paid help? Why was their boss acting like the support staff? Why was the one to whom they owed respect and honor stooping down to serve them?

Peter felt uncomfortable right away. “No way, Jesus. This is not how we do things. You are the guest of honor and I am the follower. I should be washing your feet! Stay back.”

“Jesus answered, “You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later.”

But Peter persisted, “You're not going to wash my feet—ever!”

Jesus said, “If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing.”³

Suddenly, when Jesus tells Peter that unless he lets him wash his feet he can't be part of Jesus' life and everything he has been sharing with the disciples up until this point, Peter realizes that his desire to be part of Jesus' movement is greater than his discomfort or feelings of self-consciousness. He suddenly realizes that his desire to be with Jesus is greater than his fear of what anyone else will think of him. And he realizes it with such typical Peter-like enthusiasm that he goes overboard with his willingness to participate.

“Okay, Jesus, you can wash my feet and my head and my hands too!”

And so tonight, we come together as the people of God. We come together to hear our story. This story is about us. It is our story. We come together not only to taste the story of when Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup for us, but to remember that our Lord and Teacher washed the disciples feet. He has set us an example so we could do for others as he has done for us.

² 1Cor 11:26 NRSV

³ John 13:7-8 The Message

The church, very wisely, didn't make the washing of the feet into a sacrament. That isn't just so we can keep our shoes on every Sunday! Instead of re-enacting a foot-washing every Sunday, we do it only once a year, and let Jesus' example of serving us inspire us to serve others outside the church and go and make disciples—inspire us to invite others outside the church to be our partners in mission. It is so our service and love of Jesus will take us to the people in the marketplace, the workplace, the gym, the streets, the club and anywhere else we have a chance to be with people.

This story about how Jesus broke bread and shared the cup and called it his body and blood? This story about an upside-down footwashing? This is our story. It is about us. It is about how Jesus gave us all he had so we could do the same for all those who yearn for a sign of hope in a world where it looks like might makes right. In Jesus' world, it is the might of hope and the right to love that makes our story so worth the living. "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."⁴

⁴ John 13:17 NRSV