

Maundy Thursday 2009
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
April 9, 2009

Tonight, we share in one of the most poignant and tender moments in Holy Week ... this Last Supper, the last meal Jesus will ever eat with his friends, the last moment of normal life that any of them will ever know again.

Jesus knows what is about to happen. He knows that Judas is going to betray him. He knows that his circle of friends will be scattered. He knows that he will be arrested and crucified in just a few short hours. And he is ready.

But his friends are not. They don't have a clue. They gossip and argue and laugh and eat and drink just as they would on any other night. For them, nothing has changed. Not yet. For them, the journey has not ended.

But Jesus knows the time is near. He knows he is going away. And he looks around the table and knows that he must give his friends one last gift, one thing to cling to, one thing that will get them through Good Friday, one thing that will sustain them through all the days ahead.

In the three other gospels, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus gives his friends the gift of bread and wine that become his body and blood, bread and wine that will bind his followers into his very being, until they become his own self, his soul and body.

But not in this gospel, not in the gospel of John. In the three other gospels, Jesus gives his friends the Eucharist. In John's gospel, Jesus gives them each other.

“Love one another,” Jesus tells his friends. This is the new commandment, the mandate, the *mandatum* that gives Maundy Thursday its strange, medieval name. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And he says it one more time ... “By this the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This is a more intimate and personal take on love than the commandments Jesus gives in other settings. Here, he does not tell his friends to love their enemies, or even to love their neighbors as themselves. He looks around the room, he looks into each face, and tells them, begs them, *commands* them to love one another. To love each other in the same deep and dear and heartbreaking way that he loves each of them.

And his commandment is for us as well, his followers, his friends, gathered here tonight. “This is my commandment,” Jesus says to us, the people of All Saints, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Charity, *caritas*, love, begins at home, here, in this community of people who call ourselves Christian. For if we do not love one another, who will ever believe us when we say that God is love? And if we do not love one another, how will we ever learn to love our neighbors? And if we do not love one another, then what good is it if we manage to love our enemies?

This is, in so many ways, a very loving community. I often hear people testify to that love, saying things like, “All my friends are at All Saints.” What a wonderful thing to have a place to go where you will be with those people who know you, who love you, who support you and who stick by you through thick and thin.

But take it a step farther, a step or two deeper into what Jesus is commanding. “All my friends are at All Saints,” you might say. But are *all* the people at All Saints your friends? When Jesus tells us to love one another, he intends for us to love *every* other person in this community, not just to love our friends in this place, but to somehow claim every person in this place as our friend.

Which is easier said than done. Because when you spend years and years in a community, you get to know each other, for good and for ill. You discover that some folks rub you the wrong way. Others disappoint you. Or make you furious. Or hurt you, deeply. Or betray your trust. Or pass you by as they hurry on to talk to their real friends when the service ends. Or cut you off or shut you down because whatever you said or thought does not agree with their opinion.

We are human beings, after all. We break and wound and betray each other every single day. Just like Jesus' friends. Not a one of them perfect. Every one of them bound to disappoint him in the end.

And yet Jesus shows us what it might look like to love one another, in a close-knit community gathered by him and summoned into being. Because after dinner, he ties on a towel and goes around the room and washes every single pair of feet. He washes the feet of James and John, Andrew and Philip. He washes the feet of Thomas the doubter and Judas the betrayer. He washes the feet of Peter, who ... as usual ... wants to tell Jesus how to do it better, Peter, who will deny him three times before the night is out.

He does this not to show them how to treat the world outside, not to show them how to serve the poor and the hungry, not how to treat their betters nor how to treat their inferiors. He does this to show them how to treat one another.

If you are in the circle of Jesus' friends, then you can't be too good to wash one another's feet, and you also can't be too good to let your own feet be washed. If you are in the circle of Jesus' friends, you have to be vulnerable enough to expose your toes, your calluses, and your blisters to your friends, to your community. And you also have to be trustworthy enough to handle that vulnerability with care and respect and love.

This is how the world will know we are his disciples, by the way we love one another. By how we offer our weakness, our tenderness, our trust to one another. And by the way we care for one another in that weakness, tenderness and trust.

Last week, this community shared an experience that revealed what it looks like when we are both trusting and trustworthy, both vulnerable and caring. We didn't wash feet, but we did something equally risky and equally dangerous. Al and Sue Kamens led our last Lenten discussion on the topic of grief, of how we experience it and how we live through it.

It was an amazing session. Al and Sue exchanged their thoughts, and shared the wisdom they had gained through the hard work of Al's long years in ministry, and especially along their journey with their daughter Alison, who died of muscular dystrophy at age 23. They trusted the group with their stories and their experiences. They offered a holy vulnerability to us all.

And by doing that, they created a safe space where others could also be tender and open about their own grief. Every person in that room had lost someone somewhere along the way. And whether people spoke about their own experience, or whether they remained silent, their sorrow and longing and loss was held safely in that circle of love.

It was a moment of communion, and community. It was a moment that revealed what Jesus' commandment looks like when it takes real, human shape, when it becomes incarnate in real human beings. "This is my commandment, that you love one another."

And so we come to this holy night, to remember and re-enact that commandment to love. And we come to this holy moment, with an opportunity to we demonstrate to one another what that love looks like, by washing one another's feet, as Jesus ordered us to do.

Washing feet gives us a way to practice openness and vulnerability to one another, without having to open up all the deepest crevices of our hearts. It gives us a way to demonstrate -- by the careful way we handle one another's feet -- that it is safe here to be just a person, just another broken, battered person, It gives us a way to draw closer to one another, without ever saying a word, by simply being willing to touch and to be touched.

Love one another, Jesus told his friends, Jesus tells us tonight. Love. You, you, you, you, and me too. By this the world will know that we are his friends, his followers, his disciples, his own living, breathing, loving Body in this world. If we can love, not the world, not our enemies, not our neighbors ... but one another.

Is it risky? Yes. Uncomfortable? Absolutely. But perhaps tonight we will discover the truth of his commandment ... Perhaps tonight we will find that if we can trust one another with our feet, we can trust one another with our hearts.