

Maundy Thursday April 18 2019

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I have seen all kinds of love in my life.

I've seen the love of a child for her mother, such that she worked a full day and then drove a three-hour round trip to see her in the hospital. Every day. For weeks.

I've seen the half century long plus love of a spouse who crawls into bed with her husband to hold him as he breathed his last.

I've seen the love teachers have for their students; buying supplies, food, even clothes for them from their own funds because that is part of what they need to be successful.

I've seen the love of people for their community; A love that even after utter devastation vows to rebuild and perseveres through years of hard work and incremental progress.

I have been the recipient of love as well.

My mother's enveloping love. Which I still imagine as the softness of her lap and the lub-dud of her heart beating as I curled up there when I was young.

The harder, but no less real, love of my father- a rock in which I can trust so that I might risk many scary things.

The love of friends who would do things for me that I dared not even ask. Before I could even ask.

The love of a spouse, unexpected, undeserved, and freeing.

Love. It's a word in English almost devoid of meaning because it can have so many meanings. A shortcoming in our language, to be sure. I can love pizza, but I do so in a different way than I love reading, which is different than how I love my wife, which is different than how I love the members of this congregation.

The Greek of Jesus' day has at least three words for love to help people express those differences. There is *eros* for the intimate love expressed between lovers. There is *philia* for the love of pizza, the love of friends and community. There is *storge* for the love shared within a family. And finally, there is *agape*. This is the unconditional, other centered love God has for us. A kind of love that as theologian Thomas Aquinas says, "wills the good of another."

It is this last kind of love that is expressed in Jesus in our text today. This is unsurprising, since the Gospel of John is sometimes called the "love" Gospel. The word "love" appears in the Gospel of John 39 times. Far more than any other Gospel, the closest is Luke with 12 uses. Of those 39 uses of love in English, 37 of them are a translation of *agape*. And 31 of those occur in what is called Jesus' Farwell Discourse that starts in this chapter and goes on for four more.

Love begins the Gospel of John, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Love. *Agape*. This self-sacrificial, other centered love that looks only towards the good of the other. "For God so willed the good of the world that he gave his only Son."

Our reading today in John says this about Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (to the completion).” Our reading closes with the commandment (maundatum in Latin) that gives this evening service its name (Maundy Thursday), “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. I have loved you, so that you can love one another.” The love of God in Jesus Christ is the means/the reason by which we are able even to begin to love (agape) one another. In this way, Jesus’ love for us is not an example as much as it is the means that releases us/enables us to love one another.

The renowned commentator on the Gospel of John, Raymond Brown puts it this way, “The mark that distinguishes God’s love expressed (here) from even the noblest forms of human love is that it is spontaneous and unmotivated, directed to men who are sinners and unworthy of love.”

There is a generosity to God’s love that does not exist in our more transactional world. We love those who deserve it because they have earned it or it is something I “owe” them. It’s my brother, I’ve got to love them.

But the love of God expressed to us through Jesus Christ is something else, because it is expressed to those who do not deserve it. Expressed, in the act of foot-washing for these close friends, students, companions who will even this night betray, deny, or abandon him. Expressed, in the words Jesus has for his own executors, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” It is not right or just that such should receive the grace and mercy of God but that is just what the true agape/love of God in Jesus Christ does.

Do you hear tonight that this agape/love is for you? Can you even believe that it is so? Regardless of why you are here, of what you have done, of where your life is going. Right now, in this place, at this time, God's grace and mercy is for you. You are loved, agaped, and in this love, you are saved. Saved from all that threatens to destroy, drown, or diminish you.

Can you be so bold tonight as to believe that it is so and to receive this gift of grace and love?

But even more so, can you carry even a ghosting of this love with you? Can you dream...can you dare...to share this cup. With everyone. Those who we consider deserving, but more importantly those who we don't.

I believe we need this journey through Holy Week as human beings. That this walk is one of the deepest gifts we receive as followers of Jesus. Because it is only when we move past our own self-delusion and self-denial, when we stare at our own betrayal, denial, and abandonment of Jesus with clear eyes...and still see the love, the grace, the mercy God has for us in the cup that is shared, the bread that is broken. For us. Only then can we be truly transformed. Only then, in the depths of the same hopelessness that the disciples felt on that Good Friday as they stared at all their hopes and their dreams bloody and dead on the cross could the resurrection of their souls happen because it is not our dreams and hopes that animates us but God's!

And God's dream, God's hope is expressed for us in Jesus. The one who loves us into transformation and beyond. The one who enables us, calls us, empowers us to go and love others with the same selfless abandon that

he does. To love everyone. Without exception, with a love that wills only the good of the other...even at the cost to myself.

True agape love is hard. It means taking risks. Risks of being embarrassed. Of being hurt, deeply. The risk of rejection. Of being put on literal and figurative crosses.

But once we know, not up here...but here...deep in our heart...in the seat of who we are. Once we know that love for ourselves. Once we have taken up God's hope and dream for the world...none of that matters. What matters is only the love of the other; neighbors, strangers, friends and enemies. Those who will love us in return and those who will seek to kill us.

How will we enact this love? This awesome, stupefying, perplexing, terrifying, transforming, soft lap heartbeat of God, enveloping, love.

How will we enact this love, giving it flesh for the life of the world?

Let us ponder this love, how we are freed by it, how we are bound to it. But mostly this night. Receive this love...that is freely given. For you.