

Maundy Thursday April 1 2021

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

According to John, Jesus came to the table that Thursday evening oh so long ago knowing what was to come. Maybe not in totality, but at least in general outlines. We know from the Gospel of Mark that Jesus knew it would be one of his disciples, one who had eaten at the table with him- who had traveled the dusty roads of Galilee with him, walked among the crowds begging for healing, desperate to be freed from the spirits that bound them- it was one of these who had lived life in intimate connection with Jesus who would betray him. Jesus knew the kind of death that awaited him, knew what his challenge to the authorities would mean; arrest on a trumped-up charge, a show trial with a determined verdict, beatings and torture at the hands of the authorities, and finally a gruesome death by suffocation, crying out to his parent with one of his last breaths. Jesus knew all of this was coming.

What would you do - if you were Jesus and knew those things? Would you run from Jerusalem go back to Galilee and the safety of your people? Would you strike first and try and take advantage of the accolades of the crowd and lead a revolt against the authorities? Would you question the disciples to figure out who would betray you? Do all this to stay alive!

With those answers in our mind let's look at what Jesus did, knowing all that was to come.

Jesus came to the table that Thursday night and ate, even with the one who would betray him.

What did Jesus do? John tells us Jesus loved his own who were in the world- the world that John 3:17 tells us Jesus did not come to judge but to save- and that Jesus loved them, loved us to the very end.

Love is mentioned 39 times in the Gospel of John, more than the other three gospels combined. Seven times in this chapter alone. Love is the most important theme in John.

Jesus came as John 3:16 reminds us because God so loved the world. Jesus came to the table that night because he loved, us, the people of this world and he loved us to the end of his life and he loved us to completion- to the fulfillment of what he came to do- save us.

Part of saving us was showing us the way and then giving us one command to follow-

“Love one another. In the same way that I have loved you, love one another. That’s how they will know you are my followers- because you love one another.”

This is to be our one defining characteristic as followers of Jesus, my friends. Our love for one another. This is how people know who we are... not how we worship, our buildings, our doctrinal purity. Not our excellent programs, or preaching, or coffee. Jesus does not say we should be known by our righteousness. Rather, we are known- people identify us- by our love- our love for our God, for one another as fellow believers, and our love for our neighbors.

And what does this love look like?

Jesus helps us out there as well. In his actions that night he lays before us a pattern, a template to follow. He sheds his pride and kneeling before his disciples performs the most menial task, washing the dirty, stinking, cracked and calloused feet of the disciples. Providing cool relief to these ignoble, but oh so vital, appendages to our body. The foundation of our movement and our stature.

Feet are vital, aren't they? Any of us who spends a lot of time on our feet know that if something is wrong with them, everything is thrown off. Hikers, nurses, grocery store workers, folks who work in a factory or fulfilling orders, the trades, the restaurant industry these and so many more know how important your feet are. But, it is not just physical feet.

Paul, particularly in 1 Corinthians, also talks about the church as the Body of Christ and that when even one member hurts- no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, the whole body suffers.

So, Christ's example of love to us is first to not be afraid to humble ourselves and do the lowliest, dirtiest, smelliest job in service of our neighbors. And it is also to take care of the least of these among us. The ones who are the feet of the body- who are not celebrated or glorified, but who surely support the weight of our lives. We have seen them oh so clearly this past year- the delivery drivers, nurses and doctors, the factory workers and grocery store clerks, the janitorial staff, those in the trades when the pandemic revealed just how much our very lives depend on them. The pattern of love set for us by Jesus is to make sure we take care of these often unseen but vital parts of the body because we know that their health and well being are important to the well being of all of us.

Jesus washed the disciple's feet and told them; this is what love looks like. Go do that for one another. Go do that for the world. For if I, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve- so should it be among you.

We have been hearing that same message all through Lent in Paul's letter to the Galatians. That Christ has come to set us free and has done so! But that freedom is not to be frittered away in selfish pursuits, but rather through love, to become servants to one another. To kneel down and wash each other's feet. To love one another in action and word.

We come to this table this Thursday night, like Jesus, knowing something of what is to come. At least better than last year at this time. We know it is still a time of wearing masks, keeping our distance, washing our hands, getting vaccinated when we can because even though the virus is better than it was, it is not gone. We need to run through the tape. We know it is still a time of economic hardship for some as the economy re-engages, as the derecho and its damage looms large for many, as lost wages and opportunities still hamper us. We know it is a time of change- again- as we begin to have more normal human interactions, as we return to more active social lives.

We come this Thursday night knowing that as a society we are as riven with competing tribes and claims as those living in Palestine so long ago. For them it was the Herodians, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Temple authorities, King Herod, and the Roman occupiers. For us it is the political, theological, and ultimately tribal identities that threaten our very unity as a people. Democrat, Republican, Liberal, Conservative.

Knowing these things, what do we do this night?

Do we run away, find safety in our tribe, those who are like us? Do we strike first and put down our enemies? Do anything we can to save our lives?

What do we do?

We look to Jesus. We drop our pride, grab a bowl, and wash the feet of our neighbors.

What do we do?

We love one another as Jesus did. Who crossed every boundary there was to meet people. Who touched the untouchable, talked to women, dealt with blood, and snot, and the spirits that sought to keep people in bondage.

So, we reach out and serve those who it is taboo to even interact with. We love the poor, the addicted, the transgender, those who society has discarded and left behind.

What do we do?

We love one another. In word as well as deed. We keep the 8th commandment and speak well of our neighbor looking at what they do in the best possible light. We follow the example of Jesus and engage even with those who are hostile to us. We listen to understand more than we speak to be understood. We seek to see what is underneath the surface of those whom we meet. What vital human being lies below the assumptions we make about them.

If God so loved us, if Jesus so loved you, and you, and you to come to earth to be the visible sign of God's love for us, to be willing to bear what

he knew was to come. Can't I take the extra moment to look, take the breath before I speak, and set aside my first impulse and just love the person who is before me?

I'm preaching to myself here, folks. It is so hard to just love people. Because hating them is so much easier. Writing them off as not really people, or true Americans, or true Christians is simpler.

What does Jesus do, then, when we fail to follow him? When we, as his disciples, are known more for what we hate than how we love? Does Jesus leave us and find other disciples? Does he abandon us?

No.

Because Jesus came to the table that Thursday long ago knowing what was to come. Knowing that one of those disciples would betray him, knowing that all would desert him, knowing that Peter would deny him.

And still Jesus came to the table- because he loved them. Because he loves us until the end of his life and beyond. To our completion, our fulfillment in love- no matter how long that takes.

Because Jesus came into this world because of God's love for it, and he came not to condemn us, but to save us. And tonight, we begin the three-day journey to see how far that love goes. From betrayal, to the cross, to the grave, and beyond.