

Maundy Thursday April 6, 2023

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Love.

A short, four-letter word. But one that can hold a myriad of meanings. You can love pizza and Dan and Debbie's ice cream. You can love the Hawkeyes or Cyclones! You can love a sunset over the prairie. You can love your country. You can love your children. Each is love, but each is different.

The word love occurs 39 times in the Gospel of John and another 33 times in the letters attributed to John. More than any other texts in the New Testament by a long way. In Greek, love can mean different things as well, but they use different words. The Greek word John uses most often for love is "agape". It is not the eros love used for spouses/lovers. It is not the familial, friendship love of philos. Agape is the other-centered, self-sacrificial love attributed to God. It is how God loves us. God's creation.

Jesus and his disciples are gathered in the upper room, sharing the Passover meal together. A last gathering before everything changes. Jesus looks at his disciples. Knowing that he is on the cusp of betrayal, trial, beatings, suffering, death. Knowing that sin/death/ the devil- all the forces that defy God are still at work in the world, Jesus fights those forces with the only thing that will defeat them. Love. Through his actions and words this night he tells his disciples, us, that, "I will love you (agape) to the end."

But what does that mean? That Jesus loves us?

As shown on this night 2,000 years ago, the agape love of Jesus is knowing you come from God and are going to God and still humbling yourself to wash the feet of others- the work of a lowly female slave. Doing so not so folks will say, “Oh Jesus, you’re too good for that” and you can reluctantly let them pull you from the task. But doing this demeaning, smelly, crap job because that is who God is. Because that is love.

Love, agape love, God’s love, is when nothing is below you, beneath you. When no one is outside the scope of your love. Not the transgender teen or the white supremacist. Not President Putin, or President Biden, or former President Trump. Not Ukrainians or Russians. No one is outside the scope of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus came into the world not to judge the world, but to save it. Yes, even that person who popped into your head just now as you thought, “Surely not them?”

After washing their feet, Jesus asks us, his disciples, “Do you know what I have done to you?” You can almost see the small, knowing, smile. I have ruined you for anything else because even if you try and convince yourself that your hate is righteous, your stand is principled, you will see me washing your feet and know the truth. Then, all your arguments will turn to ash in your mouth. Let go of all that, Jesus says. The division. The parsing of in and out. Let go of that and love like me. Everyone. Always. Without boundary. Believe it or not, you’ll live longer.

Jesus calls us, his disciples, to love each other “as I have loved you”. Often on this Maundy Thursday evening we wash each other’s feet, just as Jesus did, and pat ourselves on the back thinking we have followed his

command. But it is not just foot washing. Perhaps it's not even about that at all.

It is about what Jesus has done up to this point and what is about to come. All of his life is witness to Jesus' agape love. It means going out and calling people to follow Jesus. It means going to weddings and making sure the wine never runs out. It means eating with those who oppose you, like Nicodemus. It means healing the blind, talking to the outcast like the Samaritan women at the well. It means unbinding the dead like Lazarus. Weeping when our friends and loved ones die. It means being fully embodied, present, with everyone. Feeling compassion for everyone.

Jesus' love for us is not just an example to follow as much as it is the means that releases us/enables us to love. Because when God in Jesus loves us that much, despite who we are, how we act, what we say. When God in Jesus loves us that much, we are transformed. It is a love that makes us better than we are. That changes us. That opens the floodgates to our imperfect expression of that agape, other-centered love.

It's kind of like that one person who is brave enough to step forward and act that suddenly gives others permission. Have you had those moments? In the classroom, at a conference, in a tense situation? Where their action releases the dam of emotion or action.

Jesus' love, shown through his life. Shown this night in the washing of the disciples' feet. Shown in his suffering and death on the cross. Opens for us the floodgates of love in our own lives.

So that...

We might weep when the dead are Russian as well as Ukrainian. We might welcome everyone into this assembly. We might feed the hungry without hesitation, even as we seek to find out why they hunger. We might turn the other cheek when people lash out in pain. We might seek to understand others, looking at what they do in the best possible light. We might see them as Jesus did, as created in the image of God and deserving of love. Our love as well as God's.

Now, a warning.

This kind of love is dangerous. Because it makes people uncomfortable. Because it says that the distinctions we make as humans in our society are not important at all. In fact, are contrary to what God calls us to do and be.

And too often, it is these false distinctions that people use to gain or keep power. So, when someone pokes through the lie, it threatens their power and they respond. This is what happened to Jesus.

This is why at least 40 to 100 people (mostly African Americans) were killed by white clansmen, police officers, and citizens during the Civil Rights movement between 1955 and 1968. Dr. King's vision of an America where children of all races would live, laugh, and love together. Where people would be judged by the content of their character not the color of their skin, threatened the power of those in charge. It threatened their very way of life and beliefs instilled in them from birth. And so, sin/death/and the devil and all those forces that defy God rose up in violence.

God's response to violence is always love. God's response is that of Jesus, who looked down from the cross and said, "Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing." Jesus' compassion for us was

such that even as people sought to take his life, he was fighting to save theirs. He loved them, even to his death.

And the response to the violence shown to those siblings in Christ of the Civil Rights Movement, rooted in Christ's teaching, was non-violence. To stand firm in their beliefs that they were all created in the image of God and deserving of love. To accept the violent response of those blinded by sin/death/and the devil until they exhausted themselves. To trust that in the end, God's agape love wins.

Everyone will know we are disciples of Jesus by how we love. Love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Everything that we do and are. As we live out in our daily lives the story of God's love for the world in Jesus.

They will know we are disciples of Jesus by how we love our neighbors in the same way Jesus loved us. When we express a love that is spontaneous, unlimited. Love freely given to sinners and righteous alike. To those who love us in return and those who seek to do us harm.

We come this night to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. We come from a world in which there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of love floating around, certainly not an all-encompassing love like that of Jesus.

The proclamation of the world is that to live, you need to divide. Into this group and that. The right and the wrong. Even more dangerous, the righteous and the damned. There are strong cultural voices that say you cannot see anything redeeming in those "over there". On that side. That push us to see "those people" as other. Not worthy of basic respect, much less love.

I know the frustrations that come in this world. When you see yet another school shooting, like Nashville, six dead because they went to school that day. The shooter dead. And nothing seems to change. I know the frustrations when you see a country invade another for no reason at all, starting a war that has killed at least 8,000 Ukrainian civilians and caused hundreds of thousands of military casualties for both Russia and Ukraine.

The impulse is to fight, strike out. And there are deeper conversations to be had. But the truth is. The only thing that will truly win in the end is love. Only love can conquer death. Only love can resurrect. Only love can heal. Only love can feed. Only love can defeat sin, death, and the devil. All the forces that defy God.

Only love. Agape love. Like Jesus. Washing our feet. Healing our souls. Looking us in the eye and saying, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

We come tonight hungry for this love. One that will be shared in this Meal. A love that we pray will open the floodgates of love in our lives. For our sake and for the sake of the world. The same world that God loves, with agape love, a love willing to sacrifice even God's own Son, so that we might live.

Come, receive this physical embodiment of Christ's love for you in bread and wine. Come, sit with us as we watch over the next few days what sin/death/the devil and all the forces that defy God try and do to him. Come and see once again.

That love wins.