

Maundy Thursday, Year B  
March 29, 2018

Trinity Episcopal Church  
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### **Jesus' Call to Serve Through Love**

*John 13: 1-17, 31b-35*

Come now, tender spirit of our God, wash us and make us one body in Christ, that, as we are bound together in love and service, we may know your liberating peace. Amen.

Years ago, I remember sitting with my youngest son, who had found himself madly in love with a young woman. They had dated for a while, he had worked hard to impress her, and now it seemed that she too was in love with him. But given his male genetic weakness, he was naturally struggling with the 'Big C' - commitment. And so he agonized - What if she asked for more than he could give? What would he be giving up in committing to her long term? What if she betrayed him? He knew that being in love *felt* great, but he was terrified about what it might cost.

Now we all know that the Last Supper is at the center of our community worship – we re-enact it at every Eucharist. Yet John's account of the Last Supper, which we just heard, is very unusual. Unlike the other three gospels, John never mentions the eucharistic meal; there is no blessing of bread and wine, no words of institution. There is only this strange business of foot washing.

In fact, John portrays Jesus' washing his disciples' feet as the *central event* of the Last Supper. Listen to how Sam Portaro, Episcopal Chaplain at the University of Chicago, describes this dramatic scene: *"Imagine, as usual,"* Portaro says, *"the disciples preoccupied with their own arguments and debates about which one of them will be most important in the coming kingdom. They are suddenly amazed to find Jesus at their feet... doing work delegated only to the slaves or the women of their time. Jesus is kneeling on the floor before them, washing the dust and dirt from their feet. This simply made no sense to them..."*

(Perhaps Jesus knew that)... *Before the Eucharistic bread could be broken, the human will for power and privilege, for respect and esteem, for moral authority and respectability, must also be broken... Jesus recognized that there could be no eucharist until the disciples (made a commitment) to be in loving relationship with one another. Without that, Portaro concludes, what they were about to share would not be eucharist; it would only be supper."*<sup>1</sup>

This scene is especially poignant because Jesus washes the feet of his friends, *knowing that Judas will betray him*. And in spite of our stereotypes of Judas as a disgruntled, marginal disciple, it is likely that he was one of the *most* valued among them – after all, they trusted him with their money. Is it just possible that Judas' betrayal, in all its finality, is the deepest pain that Jesus will undergo in the coming days, the betrayal by a dear friend... with a kiss? In our own lives, one of our deepest fears is just such a betrayal.

Like my younger son, it is often our fear of vulnerability, our fear that we might get hurt, that prevents us from taking the risk of opening ourselves to one another, of becoming truly intimate. Somehow we think that holding back from love might ward off the kind of betrayal that Jesus was about to experience.

But Jesus has other plans for us. The word Maundy in Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin *mandatum*, or law, and refers to the new commitment that we heard Jesus invite us to tonight: “Love one another as I have loved you. By this shall the world know that you are my disciples: by how you have love for one another.” Maundy Thursday is all about how we choose to love – about our willingness to take on the risks of intimacy, to truly commit to each other, to commit to community, and to serve those who need us in the world. Jesus’ call, as he washes his disciples’ feet, is not just to humble service – it is to give as he gives, to love as he loves, even as we face into our fears. He is reminding us that, in our fear of betrayal, we can run away, we can stand at the margins, or we can choose to enter into new life with Jesus and with one another, in spite of the risks involved.

I was thrilled when my younger son finally chose to cast off his fear of betrayal, and to give his heart to his new love. And I was dismayed to see that, in the end, she did betray him, by going off with his best friend. But after a very painful time, he learned to love again. And it helped me remember Jesus’ promise that, if and when we are betrayed, he will accompany us as we learn to open our hearts to love again.

Given his promise, it’s not surprising that after the foot washing, Jesus is still not done with Judas. As one scholar puts it: “He identifies his betrayer not by turning over the table as he did with the money changers, or by tying him up so he can’t complete his plan, or even by casting him out as he would some demon, but by *feeding* him – by dipping a morsel of food into his own cup, and then giving it to Judas, whose feet he has just washed.”<sup>2</sup> I think we can assume that when Jesus dies, he dies for Judas too. And in treating Judas the way he does tonight, Jesus reminds us that “the meal that we are about to share is for *all* of us, not only the good and the right and the faithful, but also the crooks and the double crossers, the spies, and the imposters.”<sup>3</sup>

In Sam Portaro’s words: “As Jesus was about to leave his disciples, he did not ask them to look up to heaven or to God, but to look down at each other, and beyond each other, to the powerless and unliberated... Down there, on the floor, was where they would see God, was where they would be church. Our work,” Portaro says, “is to be at the feet of those God has entrusted to us, not to be fancy or fashionable, but to be functional and faithful, through plain service. This is where the Eucharist begins: not when the bread is broken, but when we are.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Portaro (2001). *Daysprings: Meditations for the Weekdays of Advent, Lent and Easter*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, pp.133-134.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor (1998). The Betrayer in Our Midst, in *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, pp 43-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>4</sup> Sam Portaro, *op. cit.*, p. 135.