

Grace Episcopal Church
Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

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Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-15

This is the night when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. And this is the night when Jesus gave us the gift of his Body and Blood. This is the night of the first Holy Communion, when the twelve disciples received from Jesus' own hand the gift of his life poured out for them - before the event had even happened in time.

Before his betrayal, his final suffering, and his death, Jesus chose to spend some of his final moments with his closest friends - the twelve disciples - in a meal. An intimate meal, with the sharing of bread and wine whose true nature the disciples did not yet understand.

He also chose to do something else so intimate we see Peter express his discomfort, as Jesus kneels down and washes his feet like a slave.

And as I read how he did this for the Twelve on that night, I couldn't help but think of this fact: Jesus washed the feet of Judas.

I wonder what that was like for Judas, who already knew what he was going to do.

I wonder what that was like for Jesus, who already knew that this would lead him to a cross.

Before Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, he sat silent while Jesus knelt at his feet, with a towel wrapped around his waist, and washed the dirt off of his feet, and gently dried them with the towel.

We do terrible things to each other in this world. The news assaults us with fresh stories of betrayal and murder, revenge and hatred. It is enough to tempt us to despair. It is enough to make our hearts burn with outrage and hatred of our own, especially when we see unjust killing. The murder of the innocent.

And into this world, where we cannot deny that the darkness of human evil looms and has loomed strong through centuries of violence, the Son of God came. And he was killed horribly, as an innocent, the victim of a perversion of justice.

And he came knowing he would die. And before he died, he washed his betrayer's feet.

Why? This is the question that haunts us in every death. It haunts us in the peaceful death, in the death after long suffering. In the death by violence. Why? Why is the world like this? Why is life so fragile? Why does the darkness seem so strong?

In our fiction, many of us love stories of the struggle between light and darkness, between good and evil. But it's hard to love the reality as much. Is it because that darkness is just too real? Is it because we are afraid that in real life the darkness wins?

In the three sacred days that begin tonight, we have to face moments where it really does feel like the darkness has won. When Jesus is led away to be judged. When we strip the altar in darkness this evening. When we walk the way of the cross. At the death of God.

In these three sacred days, we come face to face with our fear that darkness is stronger. We walk with the first disciples through the time when all hope seemed lost.

But it isn't lost. Jesus' story tells us that even death - even his own, unjust, horrible, innocent death - isn't the end. It was not for him. It will not be for us, either.

In the story of God become man, God did not give his followers any of the endings they might have hoped for. He didn't conquer Rome. He didn't set up a human paradise on Earth. He didn't prevent his own death. He didn't force humans to stop sinning and destroying themselves and each other.

Instead he washed the feet of his betrayer, he poured out his life for the people who thirsted for his blood, and he rose, quietly, from the dead.

We get used to the story of God's death and resurrection. And maybe we forget how offensive it is to our sense of justice and our desire for order and security. It's no empty rhetoric that St. Paul calls the cross "foolishness" and "a stumbling block" to potential Greek and Hebrew believers. And yet somehow in the same breath he also calls it, to his fellow Christians, "the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The sacred story of Jesus' death and resurrection does not give us a simple account of sin, evil, death, and redemption that is easy to explain or accept. And this is because God did not redeem us in the way that we humans likely would have chosen. God's logic, his power, his wisdom, and his love do not fit neatly into our human way of thinking about power and victory. So explaining the life and death of Jesus to ourselves or others is hard.

But something in us sees *something* of God's wisdom in this story. And we glimpse something of God's *power* in the resurrection.

And what we begin to learn again tonight, as this story begins once more, is this: God shows his power in love. And that means he shows it in self-offering. In self-sacrifice. In vulnerability. In humble service.

This is why he gave us the Eucharist. It is the great sign of self-offering. This is my body, broken for you. Receive it, receive this sacrifice into you. Gain strength and nourishment from it.

This is my blood which I pour out in love for you. Drink it, again and again. Remember, and relive what will be done.

I have washed your feet. You, also, must wash one another's feet.

Being a follower of Jesus leaves us no choice but to reorient ourselves towards God's values, instead of normal human values. God calls us to the hard - seemingly impossible - task of following his shocking example of loving his enemies, washing his betrayer's feet, and dying for all humanity.

We just cannot explain this. We cannot make it simple and easy to accept.

But perhaps we can recognize the love in it. Perhaps we can even recognize that not only our enemies, but we ourselves also need that love and that mercy.

And day by day, in each Eucharist where we receive our crucified and risen God, in each act of love that we are called to offer without thought of reward, in each way that we pour ourselves out for others, we are made the Body of Christ, are called to lay down our lives for the world.

Amen.