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AMDG

Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2013

This night has always packed a spiritual and emotional punch for me. Everything that Jesus taught about God's love comes to clear focus on this night.

And, I often wonder what was it like to be there, as one of the disciples – tired, confused, afraid. They'd had a tumultuous week – the strange triumphant entry into Jerusalem, preaching at the Temple under the disapproving eyes of the Temple and Roman officials. And, the shocking act of Jesus overturning the moneychangers' tables at the Temple. And of course Jesus' very peculiar and alarming predications about his death. The city of Jerusalem was teeming with people. And it wasn't just those present for the Passover, but there was a Roman show of force, since rebellion by zealot Jews was a constant threat. And Jesus' actions, beginning with his conspicuous ride into Jerusalem and his acts of defiance in the Temple grounds, were maximized for effect with so many present. What must these fisherman and farmers, from the sticks of Galilee, have been thinking, feeling, wondering as they sat to eat this meal with Jesus? And Jesus behavior at the dinner – also very strange. Emphasizing that the bread he was breaking was his body, and the wine he shared was his blood? Then washing the feet of the disciples?

As a disciple, I think I would have been overwhelmed by it all. I wouldn't have been able to understand or even recognize the deeper meanings in these two incredible acts, being in such a daze over everything that was happening. Of course, true to form, Peter didn't quite get it either.

But all of us, having the benefit of many centuries removal from the historical events, are able to see this momentous meal with greater perspective, seeing it as the culmination of what Jesus was trying to get across to his followers – through enigmatic parables, in amazing acts of healing and exorcism, in the embrace of the most rejected of his society – he tried to teach them that God is Love, and God's love is extravagant, transformational, all-inclusive and is experienced in radical acts of hospitality and submission.

Jesus chose a meal in which to be the most explicit with the disciples about what he was there for, and what he expected them to do. And, not just any meal, but a Passover seder. While, I'm not sure the disciples were very clear about what was going on that night, I believe Jesus was. I think Jesus knew exactly what he wanted to do, and what the disciples would eventually be called to do. He knew what was coming, and how his disciples would react to the events of the next two days. On their last night together he needed to summarize everything he had shown and taught them, and drive it home with very strong images and symbols so that they would remember it, come to understand it, and be able to do it. And to make sure they did, he chose two very personal acts - a meal and a washing of feet.

Meals are the most intimate thing we do together as community. We choose meals to mark significant events in our lives together. Whether we call them feasts or banquets or state dinners, meals are our most holy ways of expressing community. Think about the special meals in your lives, shared with family and friends. Meals of farewell...of celebration...of reconciliation...of gratitude. I've been at so many special meals in my life. For most, I can't remember the main course, or the dessert, or the wine, or even the conversation. But I can remember the feeling. The feeling of oneness. The feeling that we are all connected. Those memories are like warm, beautiful spheres of love, which I hold in my heart.

And bathing of feet – another very intimate act. Something people do for themselves, and in Jesus' time something that people expected women, or their servants and slaves to do for them. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, we're so far removed from the idea of others washing us, that the awkwardness of this ritual, blocks the understanding of how improper this particular washing was. For the disciples, it wasn't awkward to have someone wash your feet – but, it was **wrong** for their Teacher and Master to do it.

But Jesus deliberately chose these acts to get his point across. He knew that eventually his disciples would get past their feelings of confusion and aversion and would be able follow his example. He knew, that though they might not get it at the time, eventually they would understand this night, and would see it as the astonishing, mystical, and physical act of God's love that it truly is.

Now, two thousand years later we don't just remember or recreate these radical acts, we relive them. We wash each other's feet and we share Jesus in this Eucharist.

In the washing of feet, while the humility of offering this act to others is profound, I challenge you also to put yourself in the place of the disciples, who struggled to humble themselves enough to accept this gift from their God. We cannot always be the gift-givers. We must also be recipients of God's love and blessings through one another. God's blessings don't come in magical parcels brought by UPS; they're offered by God through the Holy Spirit, working through you and me. Let us try and humble ourselves to accept this gift of God's love in each other.

And, this meal – it has become the central expression of our oneness in Christ. In the Eucharist, our whole story as the children of God living out God's love – the past, present, and future – our hopes, and fears, our blessings, and wounds – are all held together in God's hands at this sacred table. In these mysteries, everything is drawn together in Christ and made Holy. All of us together, our whole selves in communion - are elevated through this simple meal, into the people we'd like to be and as God sees us. These simple gifts of bread and wine become love – the love of God in Christ. We take it in fully, and it becomes the love of God in us. When we leave, we leave satisfied and filled with the knowledge that we are the loving, generous, joyful people God created us to be. We leave knowing that we are beloved children of God, that we have Christ in us, and can be Christ's love in the world. This meal was enough to sustain the disciples in the arduous days to come; it is enough to sustain and strengthen us for the work God gives us to do.

Just like the disciples, we will be discouraged and dejected by the events to come, just as we are brought down by the petty concerns and heavy burdens of our earthly lives. But, let us never forget that it is through these sacred acts of love, which we commemorate tonight that we are united to God and to one another in Christ. May it always be so.