



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

EXODUS 12:1-4; PSALM 116: 1, 10-17; 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26; JOHN 13:1-17, 31b-35

LOVE IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

There is an ancient parable that's found in many religious traditions, including Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.¹ It's called the allegory of the long spoons and it describes what heaven and hell are like. In hell, all the people are gathered around a beautifully laden table with steaming pots of delicious stew placed down the center, more than enough for all. The people are ravenous, but the only utensils with which they can eat are three-foot long spoons. They can't feed themselves, so they go hungry, eternally dissatisfied and frustrated.

In heaven, all the people are gathered around the same beautiful table, mouths watering for the same delicious stew. They also have three-foot-long spoons, but they notice quickly that the diners opposite them are about three feet away. So, each feeds the other, eternally satisfied and grateful.

In this parable, misery is connected to the unshakeable assumption that I am on my own; if I cannot meet my own needs, I am doomed. Joy, on the other hand, is connected to the awareness of others' needs and gifts; I may not be fully self-sufficient, but that's OK, because I am not alone. You see, heaven and hell are filled with the same people in the same situation but

¹ The original storyteller is unknown, but this parable is often attributed to Rabbi Haim of Romshishok.

they see it and respond to it completely differently.

When Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world, he sat down at table with his friends, loving them until the end. The gospel tells us that, that knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, Jesus got up from the table, took off his protective garment and assumed the role of servant, kneeling on the floor and washing the disciples' feet. Tonight, we remember the disciples' surprise and discomfort at this reversal of power and authority, and how they puzzle over the connection of humble service to the new commandment of loving each other.

You get the sense some of them are still expecting a vanquishing messiah, one who topples oppressive power and rights wrongs with one fell swoop. Instead, the Son of Man asks them to embrace lowly service, what some of the disciples might regard as inconsequential or beneath them, in the name of love.

On this last evening together, Jesus reorients his disciples from focusing on him to attending to each other. Their identity now springs from their Lord's commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And that love includes the humble service of caring for others' needs and gifts. After Jesus is gone, they may be vulnerable as individuals, but that is not fearsome because they are a community. They are not alone.

In the last year, many people have found their understanding of selfless service taken to a deeper level. Health care workers – caregivers and janitors alike who showed up day after day, providing for the sick not knowing a timeline for relief. Parents who overnight became the all-in-one wage-earner, teacher, spouse, cook, cleaner, and spiritual leader for their families. Black, indigenous and people of color who persistently held the spotlight on injustices in our country even while as it redoubled their own

pain. Folks who live alone, cut off from their sustaining network of friends and colleagues, who reached out to the lonely. People who lost their jobs and combined households to make ends meet. I imagine that almost everyone has a memory of digging deep in the last year to give the care that others needed.

This is the embodiment of the *agape* love that Jesus makes holy and commands us to embrace. It is not romantic or sentimental, but costly and demanding. It costs energy, patience, forbearance, and solid grounding in the knowledge that one comes from God and is going to God. It demands we hold our gifts in common, belonging to the broader community and any in need. It demands we share ourselves, our wisdom, and our time with one another, seeing each other for who we really are, and letting go of the need to control one another.²

² Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily*, 41.

This *agape* love is not created by us – it flows from the love God has already poured out on humanity and all of creation. And it is absolutely essential for easing our world into its next incarnation. One of the facts of the pandemic is that we can't really know the full picture of each others' lives. There is deep weariness, struggle, and sadness that goes unnoticed when we are distanced from each other and that, as we begin to gather again, may finally have a chance for expression. This is where *agape* love is needed. Such love may be costly and demanding, but it is the balm of healing, reconciliation and new life.

So, as we turn to the liturgy of the washing of feet, whether you are at home washing your own feet or the feet of a housemate, whether you are here in the nave witnessing this ancient tradition, remember that you have come from God and you are going to God. As you kneel in front of your loved one, as you feel the water on your feet, as you watch and listen and remember your own experience

of this holy ritual, know that God's selfless love pours upon you, strengthening and energizing you to

love others as you have been loved.
Amen.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 [Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."]



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EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL