

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Maundy Thursday
April 13, 2017

We hear Jesus say to his disciples, "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." Now you may be wondering, "What about this commandment is new?" The Shema, the words recited by the Jewish people that serves as the centerpiece of Jewish morning and evening prayer, instructs faithful Jews "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and with all your might." And Jesus spoke before about the double commandment of loving God and loving your neighbor, so the idea of loving one another is certainly not new to Jesus or to his disciples. They would have understood this to be God's central commandment. So, what makes Jesus saying this a new commandment? Jesus says, "love your neighbor as I have loved you". This is what sets it apart, Jesus' saying: "as I have loved you." Love your neighbor as God's love has been made real to you in our journey together, in our meals, in our laughter, in our weariness, in your bewilderment, in your misunderstanding, in your betrayal, in all things, love your neighbor as I have loved you. You know what it looks like, now do it!

We often think of love as an emotion and we conjure descriptors for love such as compassion, empathy, kindness, sympathy, and that warm feeling we have when that special someone walks into the room. We often also think of love, particularly as it's used in the Bible, as an action, such as sharing a meal together, explaining truth in stories, healing the sick, comforting the widows, and feeding the 5000 hungry people on the Mountain of the Beatitudes.

So, if we hear Jesus' words in this context, we can imagine that we are to do these things too, and we can know that all these actions and feelings connect us with Jesus. We know that all that we have felt, even the hard emotions of weariness and despair, can be seen as holy, for Jesus experienced them also. And when we feed the hungry or clothe the naked, or show kindness, we can see this as Jesus' holy work which we are continuing.

But there's more to it than that. First, in that Jesus expressed love to humankind by pushing back against the violent and corrupt political system of the Roman Empire which oppressed the people through taxation, and second, by pushing back against the temple authorities who were collaborating with the Roman Empire, providing justification for their evil ways. So, we need to look at that side of the coin as well. The sign on my office, given to me at my ordination by someone for whom it summed up the gospel, says: "Comfort the afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable." So we also know that when we ignite in holy anger, when the poor only become poorer so the rich can become wealthier, or when someone's rights aren't honored, or certain people are excluded from benefits, or when we push back against discriminatory systems, we know these are also signs of our loving others as Jesus loved his disciples. The love of God made manifest in the person of Jesus had different faces: the good shepherd who gathered the lost sheep, and the confrontational Jesus most noticeable during this last week of his life while he was in Jerusalem.

But there's an invitation in his phrase, "Love one another as I have loved you" that draws us into something more than acknowledging that Jesus did acts of mercy, more than listening to the teachings of Jesus and trying to fit them into our lives, more than imitating Jesus, though of course, these are all good and faithful things to do.

In John's gospel, Jesus is in charge of his last week and he knows what's going to happen. He knows he's departing from the world and going to the Father. And he knows he can pull the two realms, human and divine together, not just now, while he's on the earth, being the divine presence in full humanity, but even after he departs. He knows there will be power released in his death and resurrection which can construct another bridge, a permanent one that reconciles and draws together the essence of God and the existence of humankind in a brand-new way, when we love others as Jesus loves us. The Passover of Jesus is not an escape into a promised land, where he leaves us behind, rather it brings together what was formerly alienated, the indwelling in one another of what was formerly separate. The reconciliation that Jesus effected

constitutes a new state of affairs. It is a permanent opening of God into the world and the world into God. And it happens when we love one another as Jesus loved his disciples.

This is what he's getting at when he says, "unless you let me wash your feet, you have no share with me." Jesus is saying, "I'm creating this open space you can walk into, and I need to show you how to enter it: it is by allowing me to be your servant, by my reversing the teacher-student or master-slave relationship, by your understanding that this reversal of power is what will turn the world to the kingdom of God. Only when you enter into it with me, feel the vulnerability and humility, the release of the embarrassment, the meeting of our souls in the right relationship, will you know what it means to love one another as I love you: in service, humility, honesty, vulnerability, and love. Come within this open space. Be a part of the shift from a system of power and domination to one which supports God's justice in God's world. Let me show you how you can be a servant to all."

Within this action is a statement which says that following Jesus is not an onlooker sport, but one which calls us to participate. We must know it and live it. We can't just be happy that Jesus presented a different kingdom, one of God, one of love, without dedicating ourselves to presenting that same different kingdom to our world today. We must be servants to each other. This is how oppression and systems of injustice are torn down, not through violence, but through service and love. This is Jesus' message. This is why he died on the cross, to invite us to go there too, into the death of the world as we know it and the resurrection of the world as God dreams.

Peter balked at this idea that Jesus, the Son of Man, could wash his feet. It was a moment of disconnect for him, for his image of God, this distant, separate, self-sufficient reality, meant to be worshipped from afar, was here serving him, inviting him into the already present Kingdom of God, where things are turned upside down. Peter doesn't understand, but intuits that something big is going on, so he stays close and allows Jesus to show him the way.

Then, it's over. Jesus stands up, puts on his outer garment, and returns to complete the meal. The divine revelation and invitation has come and gone. The disciples wonder what just happened, as we often do when God reveals something to us and we're not quite sure what it meant or will mean in our lives or what we are to do with it. But, like Peter, we stay close and allow Jesus to show us the way.

On my last day in Jerusalem, we walked the Stations of the Cross, as we will here tomorrow evening. And our tour guide said several things to us as we headed off. First, he said, "Stay close to the cross". This could be seen as a reminder to keep the group together, since we would be crossing streets and needed to move as a group. However, I heard in those words, "stay close to the place of our redemption, stay close to Jesus' love, stay close to the healing grace of the cross, stay close to the power released in the message of Jesus to serve others and turn the world toward God's kingdom".

Next I heard Iyad say, "People may look at you funny for carrying a cross, but don't worry about it." I heard in those words, "Much of what we do in the name of Christ and out of our love for Christ will not be understood by everyone. It's counter-cultural and that's okay. Be true to yourself and Christ."

And then as we headed out into the city, I heard him call out "yallah" -- which had been Iyad's cue to get moving, get focused, pay attention, but I heard, "take the cross into the city, into the places we live, into the places that need to be healed, into the world, wherever you find God's people." I later came to realize that "yallah" really means "Come follow me", another good reminder to be followers along the way.

Staying close to the cross, the message of love turning the world upside down, doing what is often viewed as counter-cultural is often what is true to Christ and yourself, and take the cross into all corners of your life and our world can help us find that alive and open space which Jesus created for us, the one that is filled with potential, alive with possibilities of new life, and drenched with God's love. There is no way any of this makes sense to us. We all can find

ourselves in Peter's place of somewhat not wanting a God so up-close-and-personal, but like Peter, we just need to stay close and discover the truth of God within that amazing space Jesus opened us for us the night he washed his disciples' feet.

Amen.