

Called to Community - Maundy Thursday 2023

Slide: Palms and St. John's Logo

Every now and then, I have a memory of someone from my church when I was growing up, someone who now has been gone for quite a few years now; sometimes I can't even think why it was I suddenly think of them. But then, I suppose when you grow up going to church every week, you have lots of memories of church, especially the church of your childhood. This week, when thinking about Holy Week, Vivian came to my mind. Vivian was a very good friend of my Mother's, although I can remember going camping with Vivian and her husband Orlin some summers and sitting in their camper eating sardines. It was weird how they liked sardines. Stranger still is that I ate them and it often was the only time I did. Even funnier was how hilarious Orlin and Vivian were about being Norwegians and proud of it. They had one bumper sticker of the flag of Norway on their trailer next to one having to do with a joke about lutefisk. They had more stories of Ole and Lena than I ever would have heard in the Midwest. I'm pretty sure I've heard all those jokes because of them and have likely heard them all. Vivian was also the first to introduce lefse to me.

So, when looking and contemplating upon the Gospel reading for this day, it's interesting to me that Vivian, a person who I likely have not thought of in some years, came rushing to my mind. I remember a time when she fell and broke her pelvis *and* leg. This happened just after I married Jim, and we had barely moved away from the Seattle area. Her husband Orvin was diagnosed with Alzheimer's by then and she was on her own, given that she could no longer care for him at home. I remember visiting her in the rehab facility where she was recuperating from the break in her pelvis and leg. She said something I will never forget and today as a pastor I now remember why it was so helpful in understanding others who were ill or disabled. She said something similar to this:

"I have never had to learn humility like this before. I mean, I serve people – I quilt and serve meals at church, and I make casseroles for people who are in the hospital. I thought I was humble before. But, to be forced to be in the opposite position when you're this proud. You know it's not just that I couldn't walk by myself or get out of bed without help. Sure, you would

expect that. But, for Pete's sake (she said that a lot), I can't even pull up my undies without help. Do you know how hard it is to rely on a stranger like that when you have never had to before?"

And, then this is the part that made me think of Vivian this week:

"I think I finally get it, what Peter must have felt like when Jesus washed his feet."

I have probably shared this fun fact with you before, but when I was a kid, I always thought this day in Holy Week was called Monday Thursday. I concocted some weird notion that this Thursday was so bad for Jesus, that it felt like a Monday. I mean, everyone complains about Mondays and when no one explains to you what words mean when you are a child, you of course make stuff up. So, when I was little, I tried my best to piece together what I could of Jesus' last days until I got to be too old to feel like I could ask without feeling dumb. To be honest, up until Seminary, no one explained why it was called Maundy Thursday, not even the pastors I heard preach. And, before Wikipedia, I didn't even really want to admit that I DIDN'T know what it meant. So, I just assumed it had something to do with Jesus' last meal. After all, growing up, that's what we mostly did on this night – we celebrated Holy Communion. Never once did I encounter an actual foot washing as a child.

Yet, as important as the final supper is that Jesus shared with his closest friends, Maundy Thursday is not just about the Holy Communion, although communion is a big piece. After all, for us, it is a Sacrament and that is why we have it every week. But, the word Maundy is a Latin word that means mandate or commandment, but in this instance, the commandment to which Jesus is referring is "Love one another as I have loved you." Maundy Thursday is the night where we remind ourselves once each year that Jesus gave us something new to do – to love one another, and this is how people will know us. But, Jesus doesn't just tell us to love one another. He shows us. To give an example of this, Jesus does show and tell – he washes feet. Jesus puts himself in a position no one else wants him to be in, doing the dirty job that in ancient times, the lowest of the low in the household did for those above them in station. Only slaves or servants washed the feet of guests or household members who came into the house. Just the idea of it really bothered Peter. He couldn't fathom Jesus serving him like a slave.

But, here's what I think my friend Vivian came to know and why she came into my mind this week. Perhaps it wasn't only that Peter didn't want Jesus to wash his feet out of honor and dignity, that Jesus was too high to do this act. What if Peter didn't like having to admit he needed Jesus to do this act for him? He didn't want to be vulnerable! Peter might have been embarrassed to have this menial task done for his sake. Think about this. We live in a prideful society, too. Most of us are so independent, that to admit needing anything is often seen as weakness. Depending upon others is often frowned upon, or at least, we come to see often that asking for help is or can be difficult. I see this all the time.

And, I know this in my own life, especially in the last year. I hate asking for help and let me tell you, this last year, I had to. Last April, I broke my back and then this January, broke a shoulder and then had a nasty bout of Covid while my shoulder was broken! I couldn't drive nor do basic tasks on both occasions. I had to ask for help if I wanted to work or simply thrive. Mary Spryer organized drivers for me. For Pete's sake (to use a phrase Vivian would use), Ann Brand drove me to a graveside funeral. I have never had to ask someone to take me to a funeral before that I was officiating, but someone had to and she was thrilled to be available for such a task. Asking for help and admitting you can't do something is a humbling thing. And, no one wants to put themselves in a vulnerable and often intimate position of being served even and maybe especially when they need it.

And yet, this is at the heart of the commandment that Jesus gives. This new mandate is not about loving the neighbor as yourself, which God gave the ancient Israelite people who were rescued at Passover so long ago. This is a different, new command given by Christ, about loving EACH OTHER. Jesus knows he is about to leave the world. He is very concerned about his disciples and knows they will need each other in community after he is gone. He knows they will be huddled in the upper room after his death, afraid, and wondering if they have purpose. Jesus is desperate in his final hours to give them a way to be in community – to lean on each other, to trust each other, and to live fully in the life he gives them, so that they may go out and serve, sharing the Good News.

It is an intimate act to wash feet. Yes. We are not washing feet today because given my bones are healing I chose instead to do the Laying on of Hands, that ancient gift of prayer for healing and forgiveness with oil. But,

roughly, the symbolic act of humbling yourself is the same, to admit you need something, whether healing or support or forgiveness. Whether at the bowl and towel, or the anointing of oil, these acts of humility are about us, together, supporting one another. And, this place must be that welcoming place where people can go to hear and experience the promises of life, of Christ's presence, and of servanthood. Here we enter in relationship together for place and purpose. For like the disciples of that night they heard this new mandate to love one another, we also scatter into the darkness from this place in service to the stranger and the neighbor, often in a Good Friday world, where violence, hatred and malice may thrive. We need this Maundy Thursday, reminding us that we have a charge to be together in love, to take the bread and the cup together, to sing and confess together and lastly to go, knowing that if we need help, this is the place and the people for which we can ask for it.

This Maundy Thursday, what are we called to as this Community to be the hands and feet of Jesus for each other and the world? How are we called to community? The mandate by Christ to love is no less important than it was for Christ's first disciples. Therefore, today, let us enter the Holy mystery that is Christ's body given for us; let us pray for the kind of love that Christ asks of us, so that the world may know just how much of Christ's love there truly is. Amen.