

St. Bartholomew's Church
Maundy Thursday, April 21, 2011

In the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I grew up in a family in which religion was as important as anything could be that was never discussed. On one level this was true because it didn't have to be talked about much; it was after all the American South in the 50's and 60's; religion was everywhere - you couldn't get away from it if you tried. On a deeper level, though, our familial reticence spoke of a fear that religion could "get out of control" and that nothing about overtly displaying religiosity was tasteful. Having a very religious relative or two, I confess that I still feel that way!

One time I heard Garrison Keillor of "Prairie Home Companion" tell a story about something his uncle always did during Holy Week. It seems that at any family gathering during that time Uncle So and So would read the entire passion for the collected family. Every year, when he would come to the part about Jesus being betrayed, he would burst into tears. The whole family, of course, would sit somewhat awkwardly even though they had come to expect it until he was able to continue. Garrison was struck with how "personally" his uncle seemed to take it and deadpanned as only he can that "the rest of the church

had gotten over that years ago.”

It seems to me that our—or least my—reaction ought to be somewhere between these two extremes. This is a sad night: betrayal, sadness, cruelty and death hover near. Little wonder we have depersonalized this part of the story as much as we could; the pain is less if we regard the narrative as a theoretical construct rather than a story that has real meaning in our real lives. But I think we lose something, in fact a great deal, if we “get over it too quickly.” The events we remember today have something to do with us. Honestly, it is difficult for me to put too fine a point on what each detail of this sweeping story means to me, but somehow I know that this story is beyond historical. In fact, the details are probably only slightly historical but the reality of what happened and continues to happen around this event shapes most of what we believe about and hold to be definitive about our faith.

At the very least, Jesus indeed came to introduce an ethic by which we are called to live, a highly moral, respectable and respectful way of being. But beyond that and for me as one who seeks to know Christ in my heart, even more importantly, Jesus came to establish a relationship. And not just a universal one but a particular one. Nothing could stand in the way of his seeking that relationship – no amount of

pressure from the authorities, no amount of encouragement to lighten up from within his own circle, not even the growing awareness that his life was at risk.

The holy meal, the commemoration of which we celebrate today, was not conceived as simply a liturgical practice around which the church would be built but primarily as an ongoing transaction between us and the mystery of God. Jesus wanted to leave with us the communion that we experience every time we eat this meal together—do this in remembrance of me—not as evidence of our membership in a special club but because the eating of it together changes us every time—makes us better, fills us with Grace like nothing else can; he wanted us to experience the transformation of our self-centeredness into lives of service—I am among you as a servant—not because he wants us to be pious and self-deprecating but because those who lose their lives find them! We repeat this meal over and over and over not because we lack creativity but because we depend upon it as nourishment that is not available anywhere else.

On this night in addition to but hardly separate from the institution of this meal, Jesus commanded us (mandatum - Maundy) to love one another in a particular way. Jesus wrapped a towel himself and began to wash the feet of his astonished disciples. No

doubt their feet needed washing, walking about as they did in sandals in a dry, dusty climate; but his act was far more than utilitarian and far more than self-sacrificing: he washed the tired, dusty feet of people he loved because he loved them. Deeply, profoundly. And it changed them, dramatically and forever. He said: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And then the most amazing thing happened; love showed itself to be contagious. Love is contagious. When we infuse our hearts with true love—not needy love, not expectant love, not you-scratch-my back-and-I-will-scratch-yours love—but with true love, then we begin to be transformed by it in bigger and bigger circles beyond our own small group. That is precisely what happened with the beloved followers of Jesus. They were loved with such power, with such intensity that never again were they the same. And neither was the world.

Somehow even in the midst of the betrayal, sadness, and cruelty of the story of Jesus’ passion, love managed to shine through. And though the darkness was not over for there would be more betrayal yet to come, the events in this upper room were chiseled into the hearts and minds of these followers in a way that they never forgot. And in the days that followed—then and now—when darkness

seemed to win, the light managed to stay lit. When we extinguish the lights in a few minutes to symbolize the darkness that fell as Jesus followed this way of passion, we do well to remember that: the light is wounded, deeply wounded, but it never goes out.

In the name of God: AMEN.