

## Maundy.Thursday.2021

Today marks a big change in our journey with Jesus. So many of us grew up celebrating Palm Sunday and then Easter Sunday, both great celebratory events, with little observance of what happened in between. And those of us who grew up with that tradition missed a great deal. For sure, our gospel writer John considered the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension as one continuous event, but he also takes time to describe, in great detail, Jesus' farewell to his disciples, and the events of the Three Days: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. And we are invited to participate in those days, not as observers, but as actual participants, fellow guests at the Last Supper. And, we are invited to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open to the feelings that come as we travel with Jesus.

If one were to look to all the gospels for an itinerary after Palm Sunday, it would look something like this:

- On Monday Jesus went to the temple, had conflict with the moneychangers and the dealers of livestock, and then overnighted in Bethany with the twelve disciples.<sup>1</sup>
- Jesus returned to the temple on Tuesday. Here Jesus encountered the poor widow who put two tiny coins into the temple treasury. Jesus says that she, "out of her poverty, has put in all that she had to live on."<sup>2</sup>
- On Wednesday, it seems Jesus spent the entire day in Bethany, in the company of friends. The woman with the alabaster jar of ointment came at dinner time to anoint Jesus, and Jesus responds to the critics who protest the "waste" of this expensive ointment: "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."<sup>3</sup>
- And that brings us to Thursday. According to John, it is the day of preparation for the Passover meal, which would take place on Friday. And the Passover Lamb, in John's Gospel, will be Jesus himself. Every day leading up to the preparation day has been a day of continued teaching and demonstration of God's love for humankind, right up to this moment we observe tonight.

Jesus and his disciples gather for dinner. And we gather there beside them as well, because we are mirrored in the varied personalities. So who is assembled there, this representative collection of humanity? Let's see who is listening to Jesus, present to share The Last Supper and receive The Great Commandment, the centerpiece of Jesus' last great teaching.

Judas is there. If we are honest, we must see ourselves in Judas, the one who made a very bad choice based in the temptation of personal and economic gain. Which one of us has not made a choice that we would easily be able to see later as a choice solely for our own well-being? For economic security? Which one of us has not failed to protest a false understanding of a loved one? When others condemn a brother or sister, how often do we rise up and correct the damaging

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 11:11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 21:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:7, 10-13

misinterpretation? In service of some notion of “preserving the peace,” we let things go by uncontested that should never go by. We must see ourselves in Judas. We are right next to him.

We see ourselves in Peter, who is also at this meal. In this gospel, Jesus takes the place of servant-host. No one provides towels and water for the guests to wash their own feet before the meal. Jesus waits until after it is over, and then kneels on the floor, taking, as in ancient days, the part of a servant, or likely, a woman. Basins, towels, the whole business of washing is women’s work. Peter finds this embarrassing. And we do as well, but for different reasons. Although our COVID 19 protocols make foot-washing impossible this year, most of us are probably relieved. We don’t relish our winter-calloused feet being seen, much less touched or lovingly washed and dried by others.

With Peter, we are embarrassed, but there is something deeper. We find joy in serving others, but we find it very hard to be served by someone else. We understand Jesus when he says, “For I have set you an example: that you also should do as I have done to you.”<sup>4</sup> To reach out to others is life-giving, but to be on the receiving end of loving service is very hard.

And yet it is the willingness to be this vulnerable that allows us to share in Jesus’ love for us. There is nothing he will not do, from taking the part of a servant to perform the lowliest of tasks to yielding up his very life in a degrading and painful death. *What wondrous love is this?* Like Peter, we have the best of intentions, yet fall abysmally short. Most of us cherish offering loving service, but receiving it challenges the very thing that most needs challenging: our sense of independence. We are NOT independent, we are completely dependent upon God’s grace and love, and we are challenged to open our hearts wide enough to receive it. Yes, we find ourselves right beside Peter at this dinner.

John’s Beloved Disciple is also there. He is stalwart, and although we don’t know much about him, he appears to have the gift of loyalty and constancy, even standing at the foot of the cross with the women when the other bystanders flee. He is meant to be a contrast to Peter, who promises to be faithful, even promising not to deny Jesus, no matter what happens. In this beloved one, we are forced to see ourselves as beloved as well, when we do manage to be constant, and when we fail. Most of us find it hardest to forgive ourselves, choosing to focus on what the 1928 Book of Common Prayer called our “manifold sins and wickedness.” But the transcendent truth remains: in spite of it, we are all God’s beloved ones. The Beloved Disciple reminds us, and he is beside us always.

Philip is there at dinner. He is a familiar friend, and he still doesn’t understand. “Show us the Father,” says Philip, “and we will be satisfied.” It is hard to believe that after all this time following Jesus he fails to comprehend, but truly, we too fail to comprehend. Sometimes living as a Child of God is clearer to us than other times, and sometimes, like Philip, the Way of Love and the Way of the Cross do not seem to make any sense. We have sat with Philip before.

The other Judas is at the dinner. He wonders about how Jesus will reveal himself, and God. We too look for signs, more obvious than the ones Jesus has already shown, and we find ourselves right beside this Judas.

All the other disciples are at the table as well, and they speak as one voice that they understand all that Jesus has said in his long farewell. Jesus tells them that they will soon be scattered by the events to come, and that they will leave him. And yet, as God is so close to him, he is not alone, and he invites them to take courage. We are beside those disciples as well. Our intentions are good, we fail to be faithful, and yet God continues to love us.

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<sup>4</sup> John 13:15

Finally, we are to love one another. Everything Jesus does and says is meant to point to God, the nature of God, the relationship God desires to have with us. Everyone at the dinner hears this, and we do too, because we have sat with each one of the guests at one time or another. “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.”<sup>5</sup>