Maundy Thursday March 24, 2016

All Saints’ Church Year C

Exodus 12:1-14 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Psalm 116:1, 10-17 John 13:1-17, 31b-35

We begin tonight in Egypt. A people are enslaved and the Lord is going to deliver them from their bondage. It’s a holy night, as an angel of death passes over the frightened huddled masses. They are all hiding under the lintels of their doors, hoping and praying for freedom- will they really be shown the way out and escape the mighty power of Pharaoh and his legion of armies?

My Jewish friends tell me that the root of the word Egypt means a “tight place,” a “narrow place,” a place, which is “binding.” Of course it is….. Egypt represents slavery and death, but the Lord is moving them out of this constricted place to a place of freedom…. The Lord is also moving them from the tight, binding, claustrophobic place of guilt to forgiveness, from fear to love, from scarcity to abundance, from addiction to health, from silence to a voice, from death to life. From a No, no, no to a Yes, yes, yes.

We are invited to be inside their houses, to feel their fear and their anxiety and their hope and their need for protection. We are invited to lift up our own “narrow places” in solidarity. Think of all the ways you worry, are confused, and are frightened.

What will it be like to witness again the signs and wonders of Yhwh: the dazzling power? Will we be able to turn away from our own magicians who tempt us to think of freedom in terms of money, prestige, success, safety, beauty and exclusion, or will we trust in God whose longing for us is so great, God will do anything to wrest us away from the suffocation of our own tight thinking, our own little places, to the freedom and glory of who God intends us to be?

Notice that the disciples are also in their tight place… so tight. Judas is about to betray. Peter is about to deny. James and John can’t keep awake. And the others, all of them, will forsake Jesus at his hour of greatest need.

But now they are gathered at Jesus’ table, celebrating and reclining with drink and food, imagining all the ways their dreams will be fulfilled. They don’t understand Jesus. They have closed their ears and their hearts to his message. And they have lifted up their own magicians who are masquerading as the Real Thing, magicians of the trade, who keep tempting our dear disciples with visions of grandeur, power, and might. They are on Pharaoh’s side and glad for it because really!! Jesus!! does love and forgiveness and grace and beauty really run the world. Now way.

The Chinese say that the tongue is like a sharp knife that can even kill without drawing blood. The disciples are talking a lot, worried about who is going to betray Jesus, killing words. “Not I, dear Lord.” And yet, can’t they see it? It’s so clear: all of them are betraying Jesus, all of them…..and this time, their tongues will draw blood.

Imagine, each one takes the bread and the wine and rests this precious gift on their tongues, yet none of them understand. They receive the bread and the wine without fully tasting it.

And what is Jesus’ response to his inner circle, knowing all of their fears and little egos, their resentments and their arrogance? What is his response to his friends, who have disappointed him over an over again?

He doesn’t chastise, scold, punish, admonish, cajole, brow beat, or find a different crowd. I don’t even think he sighs.

He gets up from the table, takes a basin, strips down to his underwear, down to his essence, his vulnerability, his humanity, his manhood, his love, his exposed self, and ties a towel around himself. Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash gently all the ugliness of each one of the disciples away, over and over again.

And this night Jesus is inviting us to wash our own ugliness as well, lovingly touching us, washing us, and cleansing us. Jesus knows that we will reject his gift. But it doesn’t matter. Jesus is Jesus and he continues to love, as he points to the real freedom, inviting us to leave our tight places that are binding us to the magicians of the trade who tempt us to think that something other than Jesus’ way is the Way.

What tools does Jesus leave us with? A towel, a basin and water so that we too can do the work of the servant. We will pick them up later. Later, after this horrific ordeal we are about to go through, all by our own hand.

But there is hope. There is salvation. There is freedom. This is our commandment, which is the root of the word Maundy, a mandate to love and to serve the soiled dimensions of humanity, all of it, and to know that the mighty power of God resides in the very fiber of our lives, on our tongues and in our hearts by God’s love for us.

I would like to close with a poem by George Herbert, an English pastor in the early 1600s, with his reflection of Holy Thursday, in which he uses the word Love for Jesus:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back guilty of dust and sin.

But quick eyed Love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here.”

Love said, “You shall be he. (You shall be she).”  
“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on thee.”

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

“Who made your eyes, but I?”

“Truth Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame go were it doth deserve.”

“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”

“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down first,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”

So I did sit and eat.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. “Love,” in Immortal Poems of the English Language, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953), pp. 101-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)