



April 2 – Maundy Thursday

I was on internship the Spring of 2003. There was a pastor at an area ELCA congregation who had some health complications, and I was asked to preach for most of the Lenten mid-week services. The theme was “love” This was a more conservative congregation with several retired military persons. The first service I was scheduled to preach was on Wednesday, March 19th, and the theme was “Love Your Enemies.” It was a 7:30 p.m. service. At 6:34 p.m. local time, the United States went to war in Iraq.

This experience would be one of many “The didn’t teach me that in seminary” ministry lessons. I found a quiet space in the church to pray. I scrapped most of what I was planning to say. Then, in the middle of the sermon, I asked, “What would you think if I stopped right now and prayed for Saddam Hussein?” There was a holy silence as we sat in the discomfort of the realities of what Jesus asks of his followers.

That holy moment reminded me of my time at Ground Zero in New York City. I was especially reminded of a firefighter who said what bothered him most was that there were people digging through rubble to find loved ones in other parts of the world because of our response.

I stand here now, and we are in a similar reality. We have taken part in bombings abroad. We have severe conflict within. We are surrounded by rhetoric that turns neighbors into enemies, that turns disagreement into a reason for violence. There are many around the world, as well as within this country, who are burying loved ones because of an inability to find a mutual solution.

Often, Maundy Thursday seems to be about Holy Communion. It is. But tonight, it is even more important to remember the “Maundy” part. This comes from the Latin for “command.” Jesus gives a new command, to love. This is not love that is only for those you like. This is love for all of creation. This is love of friend, neighbor, family, enemy...it is love for all. And when we fall short, we rely on God’s forgiveness.

Jesus does not just tell us this lesson. Jesus shows us. Jesus washed Peter’s feet, while knowing Peter would deny him. Jesus washed the feet of all the disciples, knowing that the women were the only ones who would remain until the end. And, yes, Jesus washed the feet of Judas, while knowing that Judas would hand him over to the authorities. “In the night in which he was betrayed” Jesus showed us what love looks like.

This is a reminder for all of us. We all fall short. We all deny God, or betray, or flee, in our own ways. We all fall short. Jesus comes to all of us, and shows us what love looks like. If Jesus can embody such a love for Judas on the night of his betrayal, maybe we can find it in our hearts to let go of anger and hate. Maybe we can let go of all the ways that the narrative of the world binds us, and lean into love, of self, of other, and of enemy.

I will leave you with a quote from the late Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, “I do not want to be an anti, against anybody. I simply want to be a builder of great affirmation: the affirmation of God who loves us and who wants to save us.” May we all become builders. Amen.

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