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Maundy Thursday

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Maundy Thursday Homily ”
The Rev Melanie Marsh Baum



The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

John 13:1–17, 31–35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean..'

Years ago, I spoke at a Wednesday Lenten service in an Episcopal Church. I talked about Psalm 51, a psalm often read during Ash Wednesday services because of its focus on our sin and God's forgiveness. When I finished, the minister raised his hand. "That was interesting," he said, "But do you Presbyterians always talk this much about sin?"

By the time we finally get to Thursday of Holy Week, I imagine most of us would like to talk about anything but sin. After all, we know that no matter what we do today, tomorrow – the so-called Good Friday – is going to come. Our sin, and by sin I mean humanity's collective brokenness, is rushing like an avalanche down a steep slope and will not stop until it piles up into an enormous mountain on the top of which is the cross.

Maybe this is why on Maundy Thursday we usually get off the subject of sin – and talk instead about love. We hear the gospel of John, where the most significant part of Jesus's final meal with his friends is when he stoops down to wash the dust off their feet. Afterwards he gives them a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved them, with a spirit of humility and self-sacrifice, as Jesus did by washing even the feet of Judas, the one who would betray him, the sinner who, if we're keeping track, and, let's be honest, we are always keeping track, is the worst sinner of all.

Tonight we will hear much more than these verses from John. Eight brave souls from among us will sit at this table and stand to recite scripture lessons that all have something in common: betrayal of Jesus. We might think of Judas as the worst sinner, but these scriptures make clear, he wasn't the only one.

"You will all become deserters because of me this night," Jesus tells his disciples. It turns out Jesus did not find twelve exceptional people to set the gold standard of discipleship. The disciples were just like us, we who seek to follow Jesus as best we can but often fail spectacularly.

Like the first disciples, we are all Jesus's betrayers because we are all broken. Each one of us hurts the people we love. Each of us turns away from people who need our help. Each of us shields our eyes from the suffering of strangers, even though we know they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Each of us betrays Jesus a hundred times a day.

Mary Ann was born with multiple birth defects: deaf in one ear, cleft palate, crooked nose, lopsided feet. As a child, she suffered not only from these physical challenges but also from the emotional damage inflicted by other children.

“Mary Ann,” her classmates would taunt, “what happened to your lip?”

“I cut it on a piece of glass,” she would lie.

But the worst day of school every year was the day of the hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear and then the other. The teacher would whisper something like, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” This was known as “the whisper test.”

If the teacher’s phrase was heard and repeated correctly, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping instead of covering her one good ear so that she could hear what the teacher said.

One year Mary Ann’s teacher was Miss Leonard, the most beloved teacher in the school. Every student wanted to be noticed by her, wanted to be special to her. On the day of the dreaded hearing test, Mary Ann was called to Miss Leonard’s desk. She cupped her hand over her good ear and waited for the whispered words.

Mary Ann wrote later in her memoir, “God must have put [those words] into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life.”

Miss Leonard did NOT say, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.”

What she whispered into the one good ear of that broken, ashamed child was, “I wish you were my little girl.”¹

It’s hard to accept, but awareness of our brokenness is the very thing that brings us into a deeper, more genuine relationship with God. Because without the awareness that we are just as broken as everyone else, we think that we are loved because of what we do. We think love is something we can -- we have to -- earn. But that is a lie.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p.86.

With their betrayal, the disciples learned – and taught us – that it is not possible to earn God’s love. That is not how it works in God’s house. In God’s house the bread and wine are passed around to everyone -- everyone! -- the know-it-all, the perfectionist, the performer, the deserter, the betrayer, the non-believer, the murderer. In God’s house, Jesus kneels down and washes everyone’s feet no matter what they’ve done or will do. And then he stands up and commands us to love each other in the same way.

Tonight, Jesus offers his disciples, then and now, this gift: “all of you will become deserters because of me.” Not because of how bad you are, but because of how good I am, because this is the way God takes all the brokenness and suffering and pain and death in the world and transforms it into something whole and alive and beautiful.

We are all deserters...but, thankfully, that is not the end of the story. “After I am raised up,” Jesus says, “I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” In other words, our betrayal, our brokenness, our sin is not the last word. We don’t get the last word. God does. And the last word is love...Love which does not cover our sin, but gathers it together and piles it up, higher and higher, and places the cross right on top of it, turning Jesus’ terrible death into the very thing which God whispers to each of us, no matter how broken we are: “You are my precious child. You belong to me.” Amen.