

John 13:1-17, 31b-35
4/14/17—Holy Thursday A

Psalm 116: 1-2, 5, 12-13, 17
I Corinthians 11:23-26

As I Have Loved You

There's something so intimate about sharing a meal with those close to you. Particularly an evening meal. There's anticipation as the supper is prepared. There's expectancy as candles are lighted, as a table is set. Then gathering around it with the ones you love. Drawing near to one another. And breaking bread together as the sun sinks in the western sky and the twilight deepens.

That's how it is in this evening meal Jesus shares with his first disciples. In many ways, it's like so many meals they've shared before. But this night is different. Shadows lengthen. Darkness encroaches. In the room, there's a sense of seismic change. A sense that something is being irrevocably altered. That nothing is ever going to be the same as it has been.

In Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, we hear the earliest written account of this supper on the night Jesus was betrayed. And in the Fourth Gospel, we hear another account of this same evening. John tells us that on this night, Jesus gives

disciples a new command: *Love one another as I have loved you.*

Now we know that the command to love lies at the heart of ancient biblical instruction and at the heart of our Christian faith. So why does Jesus call this commandment *new*? That's a question I'd like for us to be thinking about during our time together on this Maundy Thursday.

Which gets its name from a word that means *mandate*. Maundy Thursday gets its name from the mandate, the command that Jesus gives on this night.

Hearing Jesus' commandment to *love as I have loved you*, brings back memories of a North Carolina church where Bob and I worshiped during our years in Durham. That church has a mission statement both engaging and challenging. Its mission statement is: *Learning to love as Jesus loves, and sharing that love with others.*

Now that's a tall order. The gospels tell us *how* Jesus loves. And they tell us *who* Jesus loves. The alien and the enemy. The despised and the destitute. The unchurched and the unloved. The unlovely and the unlovable.

Jesus loves even you and me, who don't always believe ourselves to be lovable. And he commands us to love as *he* loves. How can we ordinary mortals love like that? It doesn't seem possible. But then we remember that with God, *all* things are possible. Even loving as Jesus loves.

When Jesus commands us to *love one another*, the gospel word that usually gets translated *one another* in English actually means *each one* or *every one*. So we understand that what Jesus actually means in this commandment is that our love is not to be restricted to those within the family of faith. A love like the love of Jesus is an inclusive love. A love like the love of Jesus reaches out to those outside these walls.

For when he comes to earth to reach us and teach us and be God-with-us, Jesus crosses every boundary. Every barrier that human creatures have erected, Jesus tears down.

We see the boundless love of Jesus expressed in the sharing of table fellowship. With those outside the faith community. With tax collectors. With Samaritans. Maybe even with women of questionable moral character. But Jesus doesn't just feed all these outcasts and then walk away. He eats *with* them. Spends

time with them. Listens to them. Looks into their eyes. Sees deep inside them. Loves them.

And we see the love of Jesus expressed in serving. He is the One who comes not to *be* served, but to serve. He is the suffering servant who fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. He is the servant who tells us that if we would be great in his realm, we too must be servants. Jesus is the servant made vulnerable by love.

We see that love expressed in his ministry of healing. Jesus heals a paralytic. He heals an epileptic. Jesus heals women who, in his day and time, have little status and no rights. He heals Peter's mother-in-law. He heals a woman who is bleeding. He heals a woman who is bent. He heals men who are blind. Jesus heals little children—even the children of Gentiles. He heals the lame and the leper. He heals the demon-possessed. He heals the diseased and the disabled. He heals those who hurt. And he heals those who hurt *him*.

You and I have hurt him. But this loving Healer heals us anyway. He frees us from *our* demons. With infinite tenderness, he reaches down inside you and me. Down into our innermost places. Down into our secret, hidden, most painful places. And

he touches them. He touches our brokenness and he makes us whole.

So that you and I can be made whole, Jesus is broken.

We see the love of Jesus expressed in his willingness to be broken.

And on this night before he suffers that brokenness, he invites the twelve to one last gathering—in which we see the loving ways of Jesus.

In an intimate setting, he shares table fellowship, even as the darkness deepens around him.

After the meal, he does the work of a servant. As the Master bends low to wash his disciples' dirty feet, they are drawn into a clearer understanding of who he is. They are drawn into a closer relationship with him. They are shown what loving really looks like.

They are shown and they are told. They hear—and we hear—the expression of that love when Jesus says he will be with them only a short while longer. He acknowledges that betrayal and brokenness await. For he is about to lay down his life. No one has greater love than this for those first disciples—and for you and me.

And this evening he invites *us* to share fellowship at another table. In an intimate setting, he offers himself. He asks that we remember him. In this supper, the broken body of Jesus is *re-membered*. Re-membering is putting the members of the body back together again.

This is our prayer, even as we receive his body. That as we are filled, by the Spirit's power we may *become* Christ's body. That through this holy mystery, we may become the body of Christ.

And so be made ready to go out these doors—to feed and to serve. To touch and to heal. To share the love of Jesus with those who have never experienced it. To share his love with those who need it most. If not to give our lives *up*, then to give them *away*.

To a world that's waiting to see if you and I will not only talk the talk, but also walk the walk. The world watches to see if we walk in the loving ways that identify us as followers of Christ. For disciples love. Loving is what marks us as his own. Acts of love are tangible signs that we belong to this One who loves to the end. This One who shows the fullest extent of his love even as he issues a new command.

A few moments ago, I suggested that we consider what it is about this commandment that makes it new. I think the newness of it—on that long-ago evening—springs from being asked to love with the love of the One who has come to perfectly reveal God's love. Loving *as Christ has loved you* is patterning your love after the love of this One who loves you so completely that he has given his life for you. The One who, this night, is calling you to live a life shaped by love that has no limits.

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