

Maundy Thursday 2011, 6:30pm
Gethsemane Lutheran, Virginia, MN

Example: Love

I am learning that it's hard to celebrate something without food. When I think about the celebrations in my family – it usually has something to do with food. We would celebrate New Year's Day in my mom's traditional Pennsylvania Dutch way with pork roast and sauerkraut and mashed potatoes. Some of my fondest and most vivid memories with my late grandmother are helping her make apple dumplings for a special family dinner. I have heard of some other traditional foods that help you celebrate – potica, lutefisk, biscuit, hot-crossed buns – just to mention a few. At celebrations around a table, we get to be with our friends and family, we get to catch up, probably make a few memories, and mark a special time in our lives.

Jesus is at a celebration around a table. He is celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples. It was the traditional thing for all practicing Jewish people to do at this time of the year. As the First Communion Students just experienced a few minutes ago, a Passover Seder meal involves a lot of symbols like matza, boiled eggs and parsley to represent the story of Israel escaping Egypt to live into God's freedom. It's a powerful story that Israelites told to one another year after year since the Exodus – it's a story that was probably told around Jesus' table. But then he did something different.

Do you ever have people in your family who feel the need to forgo the traditional celebrations and try new things? Like having an full Italian meal for Easter instead of the traditional ham, like putting carrots and granola bars in Easter baskets instead of peanut butter eggs?

Jesus is changing the meaning of this traditional Passover meal. And he starts this change by stooping down and washing his disciples' feet. At the beginning of the Seder meal with the First Communion students, we each participated in the *urchatz* or the "purification", where we ritually washed our hands with flowing water. As far as I know, there are no parts of the Passover meal where participants touch one another. People wash their own hands, stay in their own place and now Jesus is stooping in front of people and touching their feet.

Only servants in wealthy homes would wash the visitor's feet...and usually people washed their own feet upon entering a house after walking around in sandals through dusty Judea. Here was the disciples' master, their teacher and Lord, in the embarrassing role of servant to them, the student. What was Jesus getting at with this?

Luckily, the Gospel of John records Jesus' intention. He says, "If I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example...." (13:14-15a). Jesus came into the world to save, but also to teach us how to live. Since there is no instructional manual to life, we look to those people, to those truths, to those things that open up more of life to teach us how to live. Jesus is such a figure. His example of foot-washing suggests that we don't find life by serving ourselves, but by serving our brothers and sisters. The disciples did not need their feet washed. Jesus' act of service at this point was not epically feeding the multitudes, or clothing the poor.

Jesus' act of service taught something about power. Jesus' act of service taught something about the equality of humanity. Jesus act of service taught something about what goes on inside us when we help other people. We could easily say that here Jesus is teaching his disciples and us to humbly serve one another, but I think there is so much more going on.

I remember several mission trips from college, seminary and just two years ago with our crew that went to New Orleans for the National Youth Gathering. Every ones expectation was to get to the place where the needy people were, for us to come in with our equipment, education, resources and somehow make those people better. And what I learned in each of those trips, was how arrogant I was I think that way. In each trip, the coordinators or leaders would have us break from the physical work to spend time with the people who lived there - to get to know their story – to understand the systems of poverty – like how one major medical procedure can send someone with no family into poverty for life. Once we got to know these families' stories, we weren't the heroes anymore coming to help turn their life more into middle class America, but we were fellow workers; we were on the same plane, we were equal servants working side by side in the kingdom of God. Humble service is certainly work for an outward change, but Jesus' example of humble service works internally to change us too.

I think it's interesting and possibly very significant that Jesus taught the lesson on humble service before he gave the new commandment to love one another. Can you love a person who you think is beneath you? Can you love a person who you think is superior to you? We can easily fall into being a tyrant or a doormat in those cases.

Jesus sets the example – he serves us and loves us. Jesus' invitation to us to come near to him that he might serve us and love us, can allow us to call Jesus brother. Love does that. Love breaks barriers. Love breaks those culturally constructed barriers that keep these people from those people. Love looks at those barriers, picks up its battering ram and says, "give me a minute."

This changed Passover meal is Jesus' last. He won't eat again. He won't be around his disciples in the same way again. He will be betrayed, and he knew this. He knew all this and used this last bit of time to be and to teach love. If you want to hold onto one thing from Jesus' teaching, hold onto this - love one another.

We will see tomorrow how far Jesus will go to humbly serve and love us. Out of his sacrifice though, he is made present to us. We will shortly celebrate a meal that Jesus instituted – a meal that has traditional foods – bread and wine, but a meal that does so much more than fill our stomachs. We have the promise of Christ with us. We have the great teacher who sees our struggle to love and says here is my body given to you. Here is my blood shed for you. I will be the strength that you need to be my person in the world.

As a congregation, as a Christian Church, we are bound to one another through the body and blood of our Lord Jesus – around a holy meal. No one of us is better than another and no one of us is worse than another. How could a foot call an ear useless in the same body? In the body of Christ, we are empowered and sent to share Christ's love with others. Not to be heroes, not to win souls for Jesus, but to live life to the fullest through the example we have been given – to love.

