

“God’s Love is Never Wasted”

Maundy Thursday 2010

Recently I read the story of a woman of faith whom I’ve never met – though I’ve met many like her in my ministry. A Southern woman called “Miss Jean” – a sign of respect in that culture though she’d been married many years. A strong voice in the choir Miss Jean sang many a moving solo and as many a gracious Southern woman she was known for her great love, gentle forgiving and forbearing heart, and tremendous joy in serving her husband, her children, and others – all in the name of Jesus. Then AIDS struck – brought into her home by her unfaithful husband whom she did not leave but stayed to serve. Reflecting on her situation she quoted the words of Jesus from today’s Gospel (in the old King James version), “The one who ate my bread [and my meals] has lifted his heel against me.” (John 13:18)

Despite his betrayal, Miss Jean loved her husband. Love! A word that comes and goes but few people really know what it means to truly love someone other than themselves. Love – self-sacrificing love - makes you do things you wouldn’t normally do, even embrace an enemy. This love – God’s love – is never wasted but against the awful brokenness stands out in relief in unimaginable beauty. That kind of love was shown in the life of Miss Jean who cared for her husband in his illness and even as she became debilitated and neared death would still be brought to church to hear, when she could no longer sing, the praises to our great God of mercy and love. God’s love is never wasted and never stops reaching – even embraces those who betray or deny.

Jesus knew that his hour to depart from the world had come; and, John makes sure to tell us that “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end,” to the very outer limit; to the fullest extent; as much as He could; as only God could (v. 1). Jesus loves in the face of betrayal and denial.

This passage highlights foot washing as an example to be followed (though it really is a lowly and horrific kind of act as I rediscover each year when we do it here at Jehovah): “you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” (vv. 14-15) It is a beautiful reminder of the cleansing God does through the Holy Spirit in our baptism. The humility of service – washing dirty stinking feet with the rejoinder to serve one another in the same way is a call to action for all who follow Jesus. It is a call not just to throw money at the cause of the destitute and poor, the oppressed and outcast, the fatherless, the widow, and the marginalized but to be involved in service to them – to touch their feet – and to touch the feet even of our enemies who might betray us or our friends who prove false and would deny us when push comes to shove.

Always reaching out in love - even when that love is slapped away, turned aside, and ignored – that is the love of Jesus. But what must Judas ready to go and betray Jesus with a kiss have thought of this bizarre act of humility as the host stoops to be the “foot washer” and the introduces a new breaking of bread calling it “his body” and a new cup of blessing “his blood?” This meal had been the same for 1500 years? What was Jesus thinking?

1500 years of gathering to recall the great acts of God – Creation, the Flood, the calling of Abraham, the lives of the Patriarchs and the Passover preceding the miraculous Exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt all in their “taste-and-see-that-the-Lord-is-Good meal” adorned with Psalms sung and the youngest child present begging the question, “What is special about this night?” If you think people today get a bit touchy about messing with their style of worship (whatever it may be) in the church today this messing with the Passover was monumental shift that became even more-so in the life of the early church as the once-a-year remembrance became a whole new meal celebrated each and every week without fail! The first Christians – the new “Followers of the Way” focused their whole week on the paschal feast that they would observe each Holy, “little Easter day.” They were enthralled in remembering – remembering as if they were right there in the upper room with Jesus and the disciples that very first night - each Sunday as they gathered to receive the mystical, powerful, forgiveness working and salvation assuring meal instituted by our Lord.

We gather today/tonight to celebrate this meal to remember and recall that into the chaos and confusion of human existence the God of heaven stooped to dwell among us; into deceit and double-dealing, into the misery, fraud, and loneliness of our lives—into this and more the Word became flesh - incarnate, and lived among us “full of grace and truth.” And the life Jesus lived led to the death Jesus so painfully died – all – all in love – love that was not wasted.

Especially on this day/night we do well to remember that God sent Jesus into the world not to simply die as a robot sent to accomplish a wooden and pre-determined task. No, God sent Jesus to live out the ultimate LOVE in our midst. And those who tried to fence his love in, whose empty legalism Jesus exposed, whose very social order Jesus threatened—to those who stood against Jesus and His Love it became clear that to stop His Love beyond all comprehension they would have to destroy Him – take His very life. And so they did.

But on this day/night - the night before He died, Jesus spent His love—His profligate, prodigal love—in an act of domestic servitude, washing the feet of His mystified family of followers and then instituted our new meal of profligate love for us to share. His act of love may have seemed lost on a dunce like Peter and the scoundrel Judas and if we are honest, even now, on cons and failures like us – but God’s love is never wasted – it was thoroughly invested in our salvation –yours and mine and can and this Love will continue through all eternity to be seen as miraculous as, by God’s grace through the power of the blood, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit the eternity changing love of God is expressed through our broken but redeemed lives.

AMEN