



HOLY THURSDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Thursday, April 9, 2009

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Lection – John 13:1-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) 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. (v. 2) The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper (v. 3) Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, (v. 4) got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. (v. 5) 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. (v. 6) He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" (v. 7) Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." (v. 8) Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (v. 9) Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (v. 10) 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." (v. 11) For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

(v.12) After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? (v. 13) You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. (v.14) So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. (v.15) For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (v. 16) Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (v.17) If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (v. 18) I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, ‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ (v.19) I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On Holy Thursday, churches remember and celebrate the last supper Jesus shares with his disciples in the context of Passover. This day is also commonly known as “Maundy Thursday,” a term from the Latin *mandatum novum*, or “a new commandment,” noted in John 13:34, stressing love for one another, Jesus’ new commandment to his disciples, us. With this perspective, regardless of the solemn tone of this moment and the liturgical approach taken in individual services, the crucial concept woven throughout this moment should be love, even love unto death, as we get closer to the old-rugged cross of Good Friday. Holy Thursday services may include rites of penitence, scripture reading, foot washing, communion, the stripping of the church, and perhaps a Tenebrae, a service of the shadows. Yet, what is most significant, I believe, is that there is a divine “love that wilt not let me go,” you go, or anyone else go, not even an enemy.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 13:1-19

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I still remember “Sis. Jean.” She had a big smile on her face and a bounce in her step every Sunday. We sang in the choir together when I was a teenager. I can still hear her greeting me: “Hi bro. Luke.” After several years passed, I went back home expecting to hear good news about the sweet elder Christian sister from my youth. Instead, I found out that the bounce in Sis. Jean’s step had been stolen—stolen from a sickness that was decaying her body. Yes, she still went to church. She even had special seating. A couch was placed right in the front of the sanctuary. They put it there so she could still hear the songs of Zion. They put it there so she could rest when needed. Her heart still sang even though it was broken. Broken because the disease she had was AIDS, contracted from her very own husband who had been fooling around. This god-fearing, church-going, Christ-loving woman had AIDS, betrayed by her own husband. I can hear her using the words of Jesus, “The one who ate my bread [and my meals] has lifted his heel against me.” (John 13:18)

Despite this betrayal, Sis. Jean loved her husband. Love! A word that comes and goes but few people really know what it means to really love somebody. As Kirk Franklin says. “Love will make you do things you wouldn’t normally do.” It’ll make you embrace your enemy no matter what and this is what happens to Sis. Jean, and this is what happens in John 13.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Jesus knew that his hour to depart from the world had come; yet, John makes sure to tell us that “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end,” to the outer limit, and to the fullest extent, as much as he could (v.1). This verse reveals John’s sermonic theme of love that is evident in this passage. Jesus loves in the face of betrayal.

It is true that this passage highlights foot washing as an example to be followed and many traditions view foot washing as an ordinance to be practiced because, after Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, he says “you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For, I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.” (vv. 14-15) This act of service is significant but, just as important is to stress that this act of love occurs in the face of betrayal. Everyone was not singing “I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family,” or “celebrate good time come on!” It was not a time to celebrate because John says that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.” From the beginning, John lets us know that it is already known by Jesus that Judas was going to betray him.

Yet, Jesus “loved them to the end,” including Judas his betrayer. Jesus knows what’s going to happen so he says, “not all of you are clean,” and “the one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” But, in humility, Jesus takes Judas’ feet and washes them, an ordinary form of hospitality in that day. Jesus still welcomes him though Judas wishes him to die. A friend, a disciple, has become an enemy, crushing the heart of Jesus but not stopping the flow of love from his soul. Judas was going to help those who wanted to kill Jesus find him, but Christ’s love would not cease.

Even when Peter resists the washing of his feet, Jesus tells him, “If I don’t wash you, you have no share with me.” Jesus is determined to wash Peter’s and the rest of his disciples’ feet, because he wants to be in relationship them. Jesus will do whatever it takes to be with us. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, no matter who we are, what we’ve done, or what’s been done to us.

This demonstration of love by Christ as a response to betrayal and resistance calls the Church to open their doors to “whosoever” will come, even deemed enemies, those who might perpetuate racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, or any form of discrimination. Those who might look different, act different, worship different, or dress different must be loved with the type of love that Christ shows towards Judas. It is unconditional, and that is the key to opening the doors of the church. All must be welcomed. Inclusion should be a church’s focus, not exclusion; for all are washed by Christ, not just his friends. His love is without end. No limits. Love to the end, even to the end of the tips of his disciples’ toes.

Jesus loves to the end no matter what anyone thinks. No matter what the exit polls say. He loves in the face of betrayal. He shows us love in action, he just doesn’t talk about it. He gets up from the dinner table, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, pours water in a basin, washes the disciples’ feet, and wipes them with the towel that was tied around him. It takes his whole body to wash the feet of the disciples. This was usually the task of servants, but here Jesus

again turns the tables in his day; the Teacher, the Lord, the Master, washes his servants' feet. He was crushed but still caressed. The foot that was raised to violently crush him Jesus nonviolently caresses with his loving hands. He responds to violence with love. This is real love, loving your enemy.

Celebration

Even when we betray Jesus by not following him the way we should, he still stands waiting for us with a basin of water and a towel, ready to serve us with love. We might crucify him by denying him with our loveless actions, but Jesus keeps washing us to make us spiritually clean. His caress won't go away. His caress can't be killed. Jesus doesn't need us to love him in order for him to love us. That's good news. He loves us despite us, despite what we have done, are doing, or will do. That's love. Not that we loved God but that God loved us first, with a love that will never let us go. We are loved.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Hear the water being poured into a basin; listen to Peter and Jesus' conversation; hear the words of Jesus as he speaks to his disciples at the table;

Sights: See the supper table and those around it; see Jesus get up from the table, take off his robe and tie the towel around him; see him pour water into a basin and wash the disciples' feet and then wipe their feet with the towel; and

Textures: Feel the robe of Jesus and the towel he wears; and the texture of the skin of the disciples' feet.

III. Sermonic Suggestions

- To help hearers emotionally grasp the level of love it may have taken for Jesus to wash the feet of Judas, and to emphasize the difficulty of the injunction to love one's enemy, a preacher might consider an excerpt of this poem by Yusef Iman:

Love Your Enemy

“Brought here in slave ships and pitched overboard

Love your enemy

Language taken away, culture taken away

Love your enemy

Work from sun up and sun down

Love your enemy

Last hired, first fired

Love your enemy

Rape your mother

Love your enemy

Lynch your father
Love your enemy
Bomb your churches
Love your enemy
Kill your children
Love your enemy
Pay the highest rent. . . sell you rotten food . . forced to live in slums . . dilapidated
schools. . . puts you in jail . . bitten by dogs . . water hose you down
Love your enemy
Love
Love.¹

- Use the hymn “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” to emphasize God’s love for us, particularly verse one below:

Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.²

Notes

1. Iman, Yusef. “Love Your Enemy.” The Black Poets. Dudley Randall, Ed. New York, NY: Bantum Books, 1971. p. 293
2. “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.” Lyrics by George Matheson. Music by Albert L. Peace