

Maundy Thursday

Thursday, March 29, 2018

Following on Palm Sunday's reflection: If you remember nothing else from this service, remember this: Jesus' passion teaches us what love looks like.

I read Joan Didion at West Point. Her collection of essays entitled *Slouching toward Bethlehem* to be specific. Of course, you're going to read *something* in a literature course. However, for a youngster from rural Minnesota reading about Didion's exposure to the counter-culture of Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco in the 1960's would have been strange all by itself. Place this experience alongside the trappings of the Military Academy, and I didn't know what end was up. It was, to say the least, bizarre. Didion poignantly painted in language the chaos and culture-shock of the Haight neighborhood post-summer of love and the psychedelic predilections of so many seeking illumination. West Point was just the opposite. Stand up. Sit down. Regimented. Order. Fight, fight, fight. No illumination here, except for the spit shine on your shoes. The juxtaposition of the two--Didion's reflections and West Point's reality--was bewildering to say the least, and, it was the last thing that I expected.

While reading Didion at West Point may seem a bit odd for a Maundy Thursday illustration, perhaps it captures well the bewilderment experienced by Jesus' friends in that upper room as they shared their last meal together. These events are certainly the last things that the disciples expect. Carried along by the excitement of Jesus' palm strewn entrance into Jerusalem a few days earlier the disciples are filled with hope and expectation. They must assume that this Passover may actually live up to the billing of the festival itself: freedom, liberation, the yoke of the Romans will be discarded, and God will act for the people in the same way as God did centuries before in Egypt. And *their* rabbi--Jesus--is the one who will make all of this happen.

However, Jesus has other ideas. In the midst of the meal, he sheds his outer robe, dons a towel, and does the unimaginable: he washes their feet. According to the Mechilta, one of the oldest

works of midrashic commentary, not even a Hebrew slave was expected to perform such menial service. While numerous scriptural passages refer to foot washing as an ancient form of hospitality, they show water being brought so that guests may wash their own feet. The once and future king on whom so much hope has been placed shatters the disciples' expectations. The king becomes lower than a slave. The potentate willingly becomes impotent. The one to rule in majesty defers to modesty. The order, the power, the prestige that would come with overthrowing their Roman occupiers, dissolves before the disciples' very eyes. (Remember, these are the same disciples who argue in the gospels about who will sit at the right and left hand of Jesus when he comes into power.) What Jesus does is not just unorthodox. It is bizarre and bewildering, the last thing anyone expects.

Indeed, his actions disturb his friends. Peter speaks for the others--and perhaps for us as well?--when he declares, "You will never wash my feet." For what does it mean that the leader takes on the role of a slave? What implications arise for Peter, the other disciples, and for us if *this* is who we follow? What does life look like through the lens of such humility? Jesus spells out the implications unequivocally, "You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So 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, that you also should do as I have done to you. . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This is not the action of a mighty warrior, this is the undertaking of one setting up an entirely different order.

In point of fact, the other gospel narratives have Jesus eating a passover meal with his friends before he is arrested. The passover meal shapes the narrative to follow. Meanwhile, John places this meal before the Passover. The meal, literally, is what is known as an *Agape Meal*, a love feast. Jesus' subservient and gracious action embodies what the meal is all about: Love. And Jesus' rule is not by power and might; rather he leads with sacrificial love. And all bets are off for what the disciples and others hoped for, and our own expectations are challenged by the

self-emptying of Jesus. They, and we, are not invited to join in ruling the world. We are invited into the transformation of our lives and the world through the model of love that leads by service. We are invited into the reorientation of our perspective of what is true and right by utilizing the lens of grace and mercy. We are invited into a bewildering world that values sympathy and solicitude as marks of the presence of the holy in life. And this is no easy task.

While love sounds like such a wonderful thing, the model that Jesus offers challenges our preconceived notions of what love entails. This love is not romantic or sentimental. It is sacrificial and long-suffering. We are invited into roles that demean our stature. We are invited into actions that may seem beneath us. We are invited into engagement with those with whom we may have trouble trusting or liking, not to mention loving. And all of this so that their might be life for others, and they will know that we are Jesus' disciples because of this type of love that we have for one another. This does not mean that we seek abuse within such relationships, but our idea of what constitutes God's presence and love is given specific clarity in Jesus' service on this Holy Thursday. There is no room for petty squabbles or frivolous feuding. Our lives are lost in Christ's life, and the love that we share is to approach his model. Thus, this love is hard to live into, difficult to embody, and constantly challenging us to more.

Our task is to keep alert and look for it in our lives. Indeed, we continue tomorrow with Good Friday, and we are invited to remember again: Jesus' passion teaches us what love looks like.