

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – April 1, 2021 – Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26**

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus gathers his disciples in an upper room where he prepares to wash their feet. In those days, foot washing was considered such a menial task that even Jewish slaves did not provide this service for other Jews.¹ This means that Jesus' actions are subversive, exceeding all expectations for service and humility.²

Peter, one of the most outspoken disciples, is quick to respond. He challenges the notion that Jesus should stoop so low. His is a common misunderstanding regarding the depth of God's love in Christ. Jesus, however, is undeterred, and he proceeds, one-by-one, to wash the disciple's feet. In both word and deed, he instructs them to love their neighbor as their selves.

While reflecting on Jesus' radical love commandment, Ruben Rodriguez gets personal. This teaching, he writes, "assumes that we are well-adjusted (not self-destructive) individuals who understand the meaning of love."³ Yet, "therein lies the problem. The human condition is rife with distorted self-love. Some of us are

¹ *Mekhilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Jewish Publication Society, 2002) 3:358 (Exod. 21:2)

² Ruben Rosario Rodriguez, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 155.

³ Rodriguez, 157.

serial adulterers, others of us struggle with gluttony, others of us do not value ourselves highly enough, and still others remain trapped in cycles of addiction and substance abuse.”⁴

“In other words, as sinners, we are unable to save ourselves, so [we] are wholly reliant on God’s saving grace. Therefore, even if we wanted to obey Jesus by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, we are so far from knowing how to properly love ourselves that it is next to impossible to know how to properly love our neighbor, which is why Jesus provides us with a new commandment.”⁵

From the act of foot washing, Jesus transitions quickly, inviting his followers to receive the the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Here, he models the ministry of our God who wills creatures to eat, who meets us in the midst of our hungers, and who exposes and loves us in them.⁶

Just as was true of the foot washing, it is telling that these gifts are made available to all - even to Judas Iscariot who would betray him in exchange for a

⁴ Rodriguez, 157.

⁵ Rodriguez, 157.

⁶ Willie James Jennings, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 152.

monetary reward. In this regard, Jesus demonstrates the divine initiative, welcoming and partnering with those who are deeply broken.

According to Matthew's Gospel, when Judas learned that Jesus had been condemned to death, he became guilt-stricken, "repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.'" Then, "throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself."

The Holy Week passages are chilling in their brutality. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is verbally and physically abused in captivity as the disciples, now fearing for their own lives, deny him and act as if they do not know him. Luke recounts the story of Peter who is so overcome by his own denials that he breaks down and weeps bitterly. Without exception, the disciples are traumatized by the violence of the crucifixion, and each is enveloped in waves of sadness.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that ours "is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers."⁷ Admittedly, "it is not all that popular an idea, even

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 85.

among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, yet that is not the God we have. What the cross teaches us is that God’s power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy of them – not from a distance but right up close.”⁸

Understandably, we struggle to affirm the suffering of God. Our hesitancy, I imagine, is informed by the basic recognition that “discipleship is always a matter of imitation.”⁹ And as imitators of a suffering God, we are frightened by the call to take up our crosses and follow him.

“Suffering,” though “is a part of human life.”¹⁰ As Trace Haythorn reminds us, each of us “will know pain – physical, emotional, social, and/or spiritual.”¹¹ Such challenges “cannot be escaped or simply ignored.” Rather, suffering “is something we all come to know in one way or another. From the earliest experiences of pain and separation to the cumulative experiences of older adulthood, suffering is with us throughout life’s journey.”¹² In the end, it is how we choose to respond to

⁸ Taylor, 85.

⁹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part A*, (Abingdon Press, 2017), 224.

¹⁰ Trace Haythorn, “Toward a Theology of Suffering,” *Journal for Preachers, Lent 2021*, 25.

¹¹ Haythorn, 25.

¹² Haythorn, 25.

our suffering that makes all of the difference.¹³ May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

¹³ Haythorn, 25.