



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

A particular love
Maundy Thursday, Year A
Thursday, April 9, 2020
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Maundy Thursday begins our Easter Triduum, the three holiest days of ritual in the Christian calendar.

Let me start by saying to you, gathered at home:
You are not missing out on the essence of Maundy Thursday.

I don't mean this to sweep under the rug your feelings of loss and displacement, as maybe for the first time in your life you find yourself in a place other than the church on this Holy Thursday. I have those feelings in spades with you, and most all the comfort I've heard about it has fallen coldly on my unwilling ears. Things are not okay, you're not here.

But it is true that the heart and essence of Maundy Thursday is yours, wherever you are.

Because we don't call this foot-washing Thursday, or Last Supper Thursday, or Garden of Gethsemane or altar-stripping Thursday, which is where our actions of remembrance take us every year. All of those are trappings that grew up around Maundy Thursday, "Maundy" a linguistic corruption of the word "Mandate." And what is the new common mandate that Jesus gives us? *To love one another.*

Maundy Thursday and its commandment, that you will now be known by others and by God through your mutual love — that is central and that is yours.

Love one another. It seems like in every book Dostoevsky has written, there's a character who says, "I love humanity. And the more I love humanity in general, the less I love them in particular. I can expound the grandest sentiments about the brotherhood of man, but shut me in a room with my brother for two days and I hate him."

Maybe you know something of that feeling, if you're someone who has been stuck in a room with one or a few others for far more than two days now. The general love has left entirely for the particular; in my case, I have a beloved community of one other person. This week, I suggested that Missy was using the incorrect dish scrubber as she was washing the dishes. She suggested that this was maybe not the time for starting trivial arguments by nitpicking at your only community member, even if it's because of misplaced anxiety. Right. Check. We have nowhere to go, the ramifications of my behavior on our little community have impacts that I can't escape. It's always been true, but perhaps never so pressing.

It is true that we are in the Era of Not-So-Good Feelings, and that fear and anxiety tend to leak out like elements of a corroded battery. It gets on everyone around you, whether that's the one person next to you or all over your corner of social media. It's not easy to hear that I need to repent of behavior which I can justify endlessly. And it's only love that can make me hear it. I hope you're both giving and receiving plenty of that love these days. Love one another: the commandment is yours, more immediate than ever.

It is especially poignant that Jesus gave his final commandment when he was eating and drinking in a home, which is where I imagine all of you right now, the smell of dinner in the air, trading this marble altar for your own dining table, breaking real, tangible bread instead of our imitation wafers, the wine now a vintage of your choice. Maundy Thursday is not actually the celebration of the first Eucharist, even though we are sometimes guilty of saying that it was. On the night before he died, Jesus and his friends celebrated a Passover meal together. A Passover meal is foundational to our Eucharist, but not equal. What Jesus did that night is what Jesus so often did: took a familiar place, a familiar ritual and transformed it into a promise, a promise of presence. Out of that promise sprang the practice of the church.

All of the images from Scripture tonight are of the familiar places where you are: a home, a wash basin, a table, a simple meal, some bread and wine, even the garden we'll visit, all small and familiar spaces somehow imbued with this promise of presence coming to life around us.

In his novel *Howard's End*, EM Forster writes:

“It is the vice of a vulgar mind to be thrilled by bigness, to think that a thousand square miles are a thousand times more wonderful than one square mile, and that a million square miles are almost the same as heaven. That is not imagination. No, it kills it. When their poets over here try to celebrate bigness they are dead at once, and naturally. . . Your universities? Oh, yes, you have learned men who collect . . . facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?”

Which of them will rekindle the light within?

Consider your loving return to the square mile, or the thousand square feet, the small places of our lives. Consider that these are the places where Jesus visits with his presence. Take these lights into the dark night where, in so many ways, we are learning to wait.