

Lucia Lloyd's Sermon

Maundy Thursday, 2011

He was a father. He was a father who had lost his 27-year-old son to suicide. And he had seen the way his son's depression deepened during his teens and twenties, had seen how debilitating it could be. Not only his son suffered from depression, he'd also grown up with a sister who'd suffered from it for years. He loved his sister, and he loved his son.

In addition to being a father, he was a seminary professor, and so he included in his syllabus some lessons for his students about caring for those who grieve, especially those who grieve after a suicide. So that we would better understand depression, he had us read excerpts from *Darkness Visible*, William Styron's autobiographical account of his own descent into serious depression. At one point, Styron describes the difficulty of going through normal existence as someone who is "like a walking casualty of war" "In social and family situations, despite the anguish devouring his brain, he must present a face approximating the one that is associated with ordinary events and companionship. He must try to utter small talk and be responsive to questions, and knowingly nod and frown, and God help him, even smile. But it is a fierce trial attempting to speak a few simple words."

The description helped me to understand another writer describing his depression. He said that he could not manage to participate in conversation with any of the visitors who tried to talk to him. But he remembered fondly one friend who said only a few words, without really expecting a reply, and came regularly to sit silently with him and gently massage his feet. The humble, gentle foot massage touched him more deeply than words could, and was a source of comfort and compassion in the middle of deep darkness. I don't know how his friend knew that it was what he needed, or whether she wondered whether she was doing any good at all. All I know is that when he was unable to give anything back at all, she kept loving him. The image reminded me of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

I don't know why some newborns come into the world with genetics that regulate their brain chemistry so that they are able to function well in society, and why some newborns come into the world with genetics that involve brain chemistry that weighs down their lives with despair or rage or illness or frustration. I don't know why some newborns are born into situations in which their formative years are marked by neglect or trauma, and why some newborns are born into situations in which they are nurtured and strengthened. I can look back on good decisions I've made and good efforts I've put forward. But when I feel like taking credit for my accomplishments, whether they are practical successes or moral virtues, it seems to me that even my capacity to choose good is, at the most basic level, a gift from God.

And so it is a difficult matter to love people according to how much they “deserve.” It is a difficult matter to determine who deserves to be forgiven. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow writes, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” It does no good to think to ourselves that people ought to be better than they are, and to judge them for it. They are who they are. We have no way of knowing what mix of nature and nurture caused them to turn out with their own particular combination of weaknesses and strengths, and there’s plenty we don’t know about our own neuro-chemicals and long-forgotten experiences.

In the Maundy Thursday readings we see what Jesus does with Peter, with Judas, and with the rest of the disciples whom he knows will abandon, deny, and betray him. He loves them not because he’s going to get something in return, or according to some measure of what they deserve. He simply loves them. He gives them his love in two ways at this final meal before his death. In our reading from John, he gives them love by humbly washing their feet. In our reading from 1 Corinthians he gives them love by giving his body to be broken and his blood to be shed. He gives them this love knowing they do not understand what he is doing. He loves Judas with no guarantee that his love will change Judas into a better man. Judas might think he’s doing the right thing; he might even think he’s doing God’s will. Jesus gives this love to them knowing how limited they are in their ability to give love back to him, and even how limited they are in their ability to receive love.

There are people who recoil from the whole idea of blood sacrifice in Christian theology and find it barbaric. While I can understand why they would have that reaction, I don’t share it. The pleasant, happy parts of love are delightful, but the people who love me most deeply are the people who are willing to keep loving me when it costs something. The people who love me most deeply are the people who are willing to keep loving me when it involves making some sacrifices on their part. So when God wants to show us how far his love for us extends, God shows us that it extends as far as suffering and dying for our sake, even when it means that costs everything. Even when it means sacrificing everything.

Words are not enough to convey that kind of love, so God gives us actions. He gives us the action of dying on the cross. Since actions often touch us more deeply than words, he gives us actions of our own. He gives the bread and the wine and he says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Not think about this, or say this, or even pray about this, but *do* this. Whether or not we can articulate our theology, Jesus welcomes us to the table to experience his love.

Our gospel passage culminates in a commandment. This day is often called “Maundy” Thursday because “Maundy” is derived from the Latin word “mandatum” which means “commandment.” It is the same root we get “mandate” and “mandatory” from. On Maundy Thursday we celebrate the day on which Jesus said, “Mandatum novum” A new commandment I give you, 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.”

To love one another as Jesus has loved us means loving regardless of how much we think someone deserves, regardless of whether we think it will change someone, regardless of whether someone is able to love us back, regardless of whether we will be able to see any results at all from our love, regardless of whether it involves cost and sacrifice.

My seminary professor loved his son. He loved his son even when that love involved anguish that I can't imagine. He taught his students about caring for those who grieve, especially caring for those who grieve after a suicide. But most of all, he did what he could to teach us how Jesus loves us, to teach us to love one another as Jesus loves us. We try, we fail, we confess, we try again. And Jesus loves us through it all.