

Sermon  
Maundy Thursday  
April 6, 2023

“Proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes!” writes St. Paul to the Corinthians. Proclaim it with love for our families and friends. Proclaim it in courageous words written and actions taken to right systemic wrongs like racism, sexism, economic and racial inequality, environmental predation, and gun violence. Above all, proclaim the Gospel, the good news of our salvation, of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection here in this church these three Holy days we call the Triduum. For here, in sacred stories and the sharing of bread and wine in Christ’s name, God will surely bless us with grace to live fearlessly, hopefully, and fully as children of God—free from the burden of our sins, free from the fear of death, transformed (once again) more and more into a servant and witness of our Lord who rises from the dead. In sacrament and service, God sets us free to live with hope of new life in Christ from this day forward.

Today a feast of scriptures and shared bread and wine blesses us, for this last night before Jesus’ death we remember... We remember in scripture God’s Passover in the Land of Egypt, Jesus’ institution of the eucharist in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet. We remember stories of Jesus passed down through generations in richly colored stained glass windows, sculptures like these stations of the cross, hymns composed by poets and musicians centuries ago, and in communities gathered around a cross. We remember his death and Jesus is present. Our faith grows a little bigger. Our trust buckets, like streams this winter, overflow with grace, and our lives shine brighter with hope and love.

“Proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes!” For many of us, thinking about death as something worthy of proclamation is anathema, if not frightening. When I was 6 years old, my father came home from work early, driven by a co-worker. He went to bed, the doctor came to our house, and the next day my mother somehow found a way to tell me and my 3-year-old sister that our father had died; it was his heart. That began for me a long era of fears, and for my mother, a grief so profound she could not speak of my father for years. In my 40’s, I drove from Boston to Brooklyn to visit my father’s grave and remember. I hungered for stories of him and our family. I called my mother, then retired with my aunt in North Carolina, who planned a weekend for us, beginning with a box of sepia photos, then silent movies my aunt had taken, and stories, so many stories. I learned he sold his beloved sailboat to buy the suburban house where we moved just a few months before he died. We remembered, we cried, and we celebrated how blessed we were to have him in our lives.

“Proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes!” exclaims Paul remembering the passion story he heard from other disciples. After all, he was not there at the last supper. Disciples who witnessed it, including Luke, Matthew, John and the communities they founded, remembered Jesus. They remembered because Jesus loved them with a love they had never known possible. Jesus’ love dispelled the shadows, swept away the ashes of their mistakes and restored hope for a reconciling peace among all people—love brighter than the sun. Jesus loved even strangers they met on the road, even sinners, outcasts, and people who never thought of God—“love unknown” as one hymn puts it. They remembered and passed their stories on to Paul and others. “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And, after supper, “This cup is the new covenant

in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Because of their proclamation we remember the eternal covenant Jesus makes with you and me—promises of justice, forgiveness, peace and love not etched by God on stone tablets but promises written and re-written on our hearts whenever we seek God in Word and sacrament, whenever we remember his life and death and proclaim his resurrection until his coming again.

Because we are human, we may forget Jesus’s love. I have, in the dark of a sleepless night, in floods of human suffering, in my hunger for more and better “stuff.” We forget who Jesus is—how in his short life he challenged cultural norms that sustained the social castes of Greek and Roman societies, or religious hypocrites who valued over love, perhaps like you and me, youth, idealized physical bodies, and secular signs of achievement of power, wealth and privilege. Hear his words to the crowds who gathered to hear him:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus never met a wall of privilege, wealth or power he wouldn’t topple in the name of justice, peace or love.

Thomas a Kempis, a 15<sup>th</sup> century poet, wrote “O **love**, how deep, how **broad**, how **high**, beyond all thought and fantasy, **that** God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form for mortals’ sake!” For Jesus loves broadly. He heals Romans, Gentiles and Jews, young and old, physically or mentally ill, people disabled from birth, widows and orphans, men or women (and he never questions someone’s gender identity). Jesus honors with grace people who never get it and don’t expect it—remember Zacchaeus the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus? Because he revealed systemic evil to those in power, loved those whom others despised or pitied, and walked the talk of love, he was betrayed and handed over to death.

We may find it hard to speak about the death of bodies (ourselves or loved ones), but Jesus was unafraid—uncertain whether he wanted to go through it, perhaps, but unafraid to prepare for it, fearless in talking to his disciples about it and how to live after he had left them. John says, “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.” He loved them enough to prepare them to lead a bold, fearless, loving life. He prepared them to die to self as he did, to live sacrificially for others as he did “for you.” He prepares us to live with hope of eternal life after death not only of our bodies, but of hopes and dreams we may never attain.

On the night before his death Jesus prepared the disciples to live—to live life to the fullest. For his death and resurrection would mean new life for them, and for us. At the Passover, God tells the Hebrews “This month shall be the beginning of months,” a new year. Like the Hebrew people at Passover, and disciples before Jesus’ death, we gather here for a feast to nourish us for

our journey into new life. We remember the life and death of God's Son Jesus Christ with thanksgiving and hope of his return. This ritual of Word and sacrament is for all who seek God's face. Our agape supper and eucharist are as counter-cultural as they were in Jesus' day—meals for all regardless of invidious distinctions like wealth, power or privilege.

On his last night, Jesus also prepared the disciples, and us, for our responsibilities as children of God, for a "covenant" with Jesus requires our promises too, modeled that night by Jesus washing the disciples' feet. This humble act of hospitality was women's work, servant's work, yet Jesus, Son of God, picks up a towel and washes feet. When Peter protests, "You will never wash my feet," Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." I imagine Peter has in his head an idea of Jesus like Roman royalty who would be above this menial task, but Jesus promptly shatters that illusion. Invidious distinctions among Christians, or between Christians and people outside the faith, are hurtful. Jesus even washed the feet of Judas. Jesus is not a King set apart as royalty, and no one is above serving others like a humble maid. "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Today like St. Paul, St. John and all who today remember the eve of Jesus' death, we remember his sacrificial love—becoming one of us, healing, forgiving and getting in "good trouble" with systems of injustice, then giving his life that would remove our fear of death and the burden of sin. Even facing the cross, Jesus had the strength and wisdom to teach the disciples (and us) how to embrace life with courage, hope and grace after whatever deaths we grieve in our own lives. We give thanks for the bread and wine of his life poured out for us. We pick up towels and wash one another's feet in loving service. For in remembering Jesus, and those we love but see no longer, we remember who we are, and whose we are. We are part of them, and they are always part of us. So it is with our remembrance of Jesus. In the words of St. John, "we abide in him and he in us." I invite you to join us these precious three days as we celebrate the wisdom of St. Paul, "Proclaim his death, until his coming again!"