

Proclaiming the Empty Tomb to an Empty Room

Maundy Thursday 2020

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I chose Maundy Thursday because I was having the greatest struggle with how to prepare online worship for this day. My struggle, it seems, stems from how Maundy Thursday is celebrated in my setting. Maundy Thursday worship engages the senses: it is very tactile (feel and touch); you taste, see, and hear; this sensory experience is not easily replicated in the confines of worship broadcasted from my home into the homes of others.

Facebook reminded me this week of a Maundy Thursday I preached and posted in 2012, entitled, "Get Real". In that sermon, I lift up our rituals- tasting the bread and wine of communion, feeling the splash of the cool water on our feet, watching the stripping of Jesus' humanity and dignity as the altar is stripped, hearing the cries of lament from Psalm 22. These rituals powerfully remind us how real life is with God. They remind us how life with God is everlasting in contrast to the seemingly real things in our life which are only temporal- things like power, prestige and wealth.

So, how do we "get real" on Maundy Thursday this year? My initial realization for this year's worship on Maundy Thursday, came from the biblical texts appointed for Maundy Thursday. The biblical texts appoint for Maundy Thursday from the Revised Common Lectionary are the same every year. John 13 (1-17,31b-35) recounts Jesus' last meal with his disciples; in love and humility, Jesus kneels at his disciples' feet and washes them. He sets an example for his disciples to follow. And then, preparing his disciples for his departure, he gives them a new commandment-"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another."

You know the story- and certainly Jesus command to love and to follow his example is foundational to our identity as beloved children of God. God's love is the first love- that's what Henri Nouwen calls it in his lecture, "Who Are We?" (I'll share more from his lecture in a minute). Jesus' command to love and Nouwen's reflections on God's love helped me to look behind our rituals. I didn't forget that God loves us unconditionally, but as a pastor, preacher, and I worship leader, I

needed to mourn with the congregation those things that we could not do this year.

Back to Nouwen- in part 3 of "Who are We?", Nouwen uses sacramental language, such as we hear in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, another appointed reading for Maundy Thursday, to describe the identifying marks of Christian life, including our call to live and serve. We are- Taken (Chosen)/Blessed/Broken/Given.

As those who are taken (chosen), we see and recognize that each of us is unique and precious; and we are called to help others see that they're chosen as well. As those who are blessed, we hear the voice of the one who calls us beloved (over and against the voice that leads to self-rejection, and we are called to bless one another. As those who are broken, we take up our cross, claim our brokenness, and live our brokenness under that blessing of God. Our call is not to fix brokenness, but to help others put their brokenness under the blessing, and to live as beloved of God. As those who are given, we give our lives away so that it will bear fruit. In life and in death, our lives bear fruit, and we are called to help one another to discover how, like Christ, we give our lives away.

At the national as well as the regional levels of the leadership of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), in which I am rostered, it is recommended that we fast from the sacrament of holy communion for now. Divergent opinions have been expressed and creative expressions of virtual holy communion have been enacted. I have followed the recommendations for now, even though I long for the sacraments as do many in our congregation. In this moment, I am comforted and reassured by God's love for us (the first love), and by (as Nouwen calls it) the second love- our call to love each other. We are loving each other in some new ways, and in some of the ways we have always loved. We love one another imperfectly even as we seek to follow the example of our Lord Jesus.

Tomorrow, Maundy Thursday, my husband and I will lead online worship from our dining room table. My prayer is that worshippers will be reminded of God's unconditional, self-sacrificing love, and that will (re)discover in moment their lives as taken (chosen)/blessed/broken/given.

Another Maundy Thursday ritual in the congregation I serve is to celebrate first communion for our children. I cannot describe (perhaps you have also experienced) the pure enthusiasm, eagerness, and joy of a child's first experience at the table. I will miss that most this year- as these children have always been an inspiration and reminder for us of how "this is my body" and "this is my blood" is most real to us, every time we receive.

I look forward to when we will gather again; I am hopeful, and it will be a joyous day. In the meantime, we are profoundly loving one another from a distance, so that we will do our part to make a difference in these crucial times.

I like what Bob Sitze (writer for our denomination's magazine) says when he writes: "This week's worship experiences will be virtual in one sense- I am not together physically with any of you- but very, very real in every other sense. The absence of the week's usual sacred contexts won't limit my worship. I'll miss the taste of the bread, but will savor being forgiven. I may not hear the Passion story in a somber, darkened sanctuary, but some of today's life and death narratives will help us remember that Jesus' death made life possible. I may not experience the fragrance of Easter flowers at church, but will cherish every Springtime blossom and bud I see as proof that life is stronger than death. This will be a Holy Week for holy people! Including me."

References

Henri Nouwen's lecture, "Who Are We?" was released as an audio book in 2017

See also, Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, especially pp. 48 ff.