



Love One Another

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Maundy Thursday ~ April 9, 2009*

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, 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. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, 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."

As she lay in bed that morning waiting for her children to arrive, she thought once again about what she was going to say to them. Although the blinds were lowered so that the sun would not shine directly in her eyes, she could look out and see the garden below; the tulips radiant in their rich velvety colors in the morning sun, the new leaves on the trees unfurling; a gentle breeze bearing the sounds and smells of spring earth, playful birds.

She paused over each of her three children, cupping them gently in her mind. Her oldest child, a daughter, whose fierce determination had fueled her academic mastery, propelled her through law school, and into a highly competitive and successful legal career in Atlanta. She and her husband had no children. She had little use for the mess of emotions, preferring to hone her meticulous mind to razor sharp accuracy for debating issues of political and moral consequence. She used her capacities to further not only her own career; her work often helped those in great need. She was not cold, but neither was she warm. She was determined, opinionated, uncompromising.

Her second child, a son, was altogether different. He, too, was accomplished, but had none of his sister's steely drive. A potter in Vermont, gifted enough to make a living with his art, he was married to a cheerful, barefoot girl of Latin American descent. They had four children, two dogs, three cats, numerous chickens, a couple of goats,

and assorted pet reptiles. Their home was small, simple, messy, and colorful. They baked together, worked in their garden, and had achieved varying degrees of musical accomplishment with an assortment of instruments. They shared two bedrooms for the six of them – not including the animals.

Her third child, also a son, lived nearby. He was single and searching – for what she knew not. She did not know if he knew what he was searching for. After two years of college, he thought he needed more structure and purpose in his life. He joined the Navy, saw something of the world, and returned home. He drank too much and kept his own counsel, stayed apart and did not reveal much of what was going on within. While he never had trouble getting work, he never kept a job long. From a distance his life looked alright but she knew that something was gnawing at him, keeping him on edge, searching and uncomfortable.

She could picture them now, traveling from their respective worlds. Her daughter and husband, flying in business class, debating the op-ed positions in this morning's Times, weighing the problems of the world.

Her potter son and his family bouncing about in their ancient VW bus, singing songs, eating fruit. She hoped they wouldn't bring the dogs; their would be enough commotion without them.

Living just a few miles away, her youngest would not yet be on his way. He was probably tinkering with a broken appliance.

She had asked them all to come home together this one last time. It was not a convenient time for her daughter, being in the middle of an important case. Her youngest didn't see why he needed to show up; after all, he saw her at least every other day. But the family had not been all together since her husband had died. That was six years ago. Even then, things were tense among them. It certainly hadn't gotten any better since then. She felt good about the relationship she had with each of her children and their families. But whatever friendships they had with one another were strained, at best. Different interests, competitiveness, and petty jealousies each contributed; she suspected that it had been more than a year since any one of them had been in touch with an other.

She would die soon. She was 84 and her health was not good. Hers had been a full life and she felt about as reconciled to the prospect of death as she imagined she could be. It was all right. But her children's disharmony was not all right. She could not endure the thought that without her, they would soon lose touch altogether.

Later in the afternoon, when everyone was there, including the two older of her four grandchildren, she told them she knew she would die sometime soon. Then, as she had rehearsed many times over, she started to paraphrase the Gospel of John: 'Children, I am with you now for only a little while longer. Before I go, there are some things I want you to hear, to remember, and – I hope, to embrace. I am saying these things to you so that that the joy I have known with you, may become your joy, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my parting wish, my one and only wish: that you love one another. Each of you has known my love for you. Each of you have loved me and have loved your father. Now love one another, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. You have had your differences and will continue to do so. You did not choose to be sister and brothers, but you are; God chose you and created you. I am saying all of this because I love you and I ask that you love one another.'

The love Jesus asks us, commands us, to have for one another is the love he had for his disciples as he parted from them. Jesus' words are spoken in the upper room on this night during the last supper before his death. The love Jesus expresses is like the love a mother has for her children. It is not erotic, romantic love. Neither is it the love of friendship born of like-mindedness or shared interests. It is deep. It is unwavering. It is insistent. It is sacrificial. It is enduring. Through thick and thin, through smooth and rough, from beginning to beyond.

When Jesus gathered with his friends for the last time, he washed their feet. The woman in my story did not wash her children's feet that day; she was too frail. But she had washed those feet of theirs, many times, many years earlier – tossed them all in the tub together before supper when they were but little monkeys; washed them from head to toe with her love.

We do not choose whether or not to be children of God; that gift – and responsibility – is ours. But we may and we must accept that inheritance, by choosing to love, choosing to nurture, support and challenge one another, even when it may be easier to retreat and tend to our own needs.

Christian love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. Are you and I to love one another? We did not choose to be one another's sisters and brothers, but we are. We did not ask our neighbors to be our sister or brother, but they are. We did not ask the stranger or the enemy to be our sister or brother, but they are. "You did not choose me but I chose you," Jesus will say to them; "and I appointed you to go and bear fruit." That fruit is love. It is not enough for us to gaze adoringly at or to love Jesus. Jesus says, turn now; turn to one another; find me, love me, in the other.