

Reflection:

Welcome to Maundy Thursday at ECY. Maundy Thursday is traditionally a very tactile service, where feet are washed, eucharist is celebrated, and altars are stripped. We know why we can't celebrate these tactile activities this year. Tonight I hope we honor the agony of that limitation. Our service will conclude with Christ's own agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he fervently prays for this cup to pass. And that may be where many of us are tonight: praying for our own agony, despair, and waiting to end. Tonight, Jesus shares your pain.

But Maundy Thursday also recalls the Lord's great commandment, to love one another. With this commandment comes both service and sacrament, the washing of the disciple's feet and the institution of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. These active expressions of love seem starkly at odds with the agony of waiting. But as we contemplate these deep mysteries tonight, I invite us to consider how love unites all these experiences. How has love led you to serve, to feast and celebrate, and to offer your full self to another, in your own life? This could range from the way you have done the dishes for a roommate who didn't deserve it, to the way a group of friends celebrated after a long time apart, or to the dedication you have to a vocation, a partner, or a dear hobby. Later tonight, we will watch *Babette's Feast*, a movie depicting one example of full self-offering of love in service, feast, and agonizing expectation. To aid in our Reflection, I want to show one moment of that film, where a General who attends Babette's own feast of self-offering, meditates on its importance. Let's watch.

[[General's Speech Babette's Feast]]

Amen. And now for our Opening Hymn.

Sermon:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

During most Maundy Thursday services, many Episcopal churches focus on one of the following themes: washing feet, an act of service; celebrating the institution of the Eucharist, an act of feasting; or the stripping the altar and keeping an all-night vigil, an act of waiting. The juxtaposition of these three acts in one evening can be quite disorienting, especially to people relatively new to the Triduum, these three extraordinary nights where we remember and participate in Christ's Passion. This year, Maundy Thursday invites us into the deep paradox of living a Christian faith a year into a global pandemic. This year, we cannot wash feet: loving someone this year often means keeping distance from strangers, let alone washing their feet. This year, we cannot celebrate Eucharist: feasting almost by definition requires people in close proximity, so for the past year Christians have fasted where we might normally celebrate. This year, our altars have already been stripped. Dwight Chapel stands empty, save for the Covid samples that are brought there for testing. For many, the joy of last year's Easter never came. Much of this past year has been a painful experience of weeping and weariness. We have experienced: fear, isolation, and deep loss. What is the message of Maundy Thursday in a world where service is distance, where sacrament is sacrificed, where waiting is indefinite?

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

God's love has always been an activity of serving, celebrating, and waiting. As our reading from Exodus recalls, the love of God served, celebrated, and waited on behalf of His people in Israel. Notice how the LORD's actions for Israel stem from God's own self-offering to Israel in covenant. Like a mother hen, God heard the cries of her covenantal children and loved them to the end. Loving them to the end in Exodus means following through on the promises once given: you will be my people, I will be your God. And the LORD serves toward that reality, waits for that reality, and celebrates that reality. Contrary to the lords and gods of Egypt, who *coerced* service, the LORD of Israel *offers* service, dismantling the powers that enslaved them and sustaining them in their exodus and wandering. And this is a God whose service leads to celebration, whose acts in Egypt were celebrated by Miriam and Moses as they crossed the Red Sea, and whose acts are celebrated by Jews as recently as this past weekend. But even those who recall God's liberating love in Exodus waited. Can you imagine? Eating a meal, with your shoes on, your staff in hand, waiting in the dark of night for the moment God would pass over? The final execution of the foretold prophecy, those excruciating hours before dawn, when darkness feels most impenetrable. The love of God has always been an activity of serving, celebrating, and waiting.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

This is also the loving, self-offering actions of Jesus. We don't know what kind of feast Jesus was a part of - we only know that it is not a Jewish Seder - but early Christians referred to it as a Love Feast, or an Agape Meal. Whether Jesus helped prepare the meal, was a host, or simply attended a meal with his friends, Jesus radically identified with the feast that was prepared. "This is my body that is for you," he says in Corinthians, establishing a self-offering covenant in bread and wine, body, sweat, and blood. The feast is an act of service. Paul's harshest words

in Corinthians are reserved for those who abuse this central premise of the Lord's Supper: in Corinth, the rich were bringing their own food and celebrating, while the poor watched and starved. For Paul, this fundamentally misunderstands God's self-offering in Jesus, whose service among people is the texture of divine love. The feast is only the expression of Jesus' love when serving and celebrating converge. In John's Gospel, Jesus eagerly informs his disciples that this act of celebration is one and the same as this act of serving. "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." This bond of love runs both ways though: for those who would rather feast, Jesus gently reminds them that love is also service. And for those who would rather serve, who are like Peter, and say, "not my feet, Lord!" Jesus invites them to the feast, to be served, to feast in celebration. These activities are the outworking of the same sustaining love of Jesus, the love that instructs even as it serves and celebrates: as Jesus says, "as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The Lordship of Jesus is the lordship that serves as it celebrates, whose love stretches to the end, from the feast to the washing, even to the excruciating agony of waiting.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Jesus' love leads him to serve and to celebrate. But the final act of self offering is just that: an offering of self that waits in the agony of response. Jesus offers himself up *to be done to*. This is the entrance into the Passion. We call it the Passion not because it's a narrative full of passionate experiences but because Jesus enters into ***passion***, more like the passive tense than a passionate experience. Passion is the state of being done to, the state where one becomes an object and not a subject. The Greek word translated as "betray" in our Gospel text is more accurately translated "to hand over." But the agonizing hours anticipating this handing over was not wholly passive. It required the will, perseverance, and commitment to

follow through. Unlike the disciples, who stay but who are overcome with fatigue, Christ's self offering is steadfast, consistent, and unified.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

In Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Quashie, reflecting on how prayer expresses one's dynamic interior, what he calls "quiet," meditates on the paradox of waiting. His words also apply to the paradox of Jesus' own waiting.

[QUOTE] "An essential aspect to the idiom of prayer is waiting: the praying subject waits with agency, where waiting is not the result of having been acted upon (as in being made to wait), but is itself action. In waiting, there is no clear language or determined outcome; there is simply the practice of contemplation and discernment. This is a challenge to the way we commonly think of waiting... One waits, waits to see one's own self revealed, to feel the range of sentiments that manifest when one sits and... waits." [END QUOTE]

And so, tonight, we are called to watch and wait with Jesus. Rather than being a contradiction from the usual ceremony and service that adorns our Maundy Thursday liturgy, our watching and waiting with Jesus in a time where we cannot serve and celebrate is itself its own dynamic entrance into the mystery of Christ's self offering. For it too is the instinct of love, just as much as love instinctively serves and celebrates. Love waits for response, much like that time you texted your crush apprehensively and waited, watching those three little dots. Tonight, on this night of love we call Maundy Thursday, love's endeavor is its watchful expectation, its service, its celebration, its agony. Where are you watching with

Christ? Where are your loves? Where is your serving, your celebrations, your agonies?

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

May we enter into Christ's mystery of the Passion with the assurance that Christ himself loves, serves, celebrates, and agonizes with us. Amen.

Reflection for Video:

*Open are the gifts of God,
gifts of love to mind and sense;
hidden is love's agony,
love's endeavor, love's expense.
Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all its all expends.
Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.
Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.*