

LISTENING ALONGSIDE



ECHOING CHRIST

Lenten Devotions 2017

Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

Echoing a New Commandment By Elizabeth Edwards

Bitter herbs eaten on a bitter night.
The taste of wine mingled with tears.
The smell of roasted lamb with the sweet aroma of friendship.
Refreshing water poured over weary feet.
Redeeming mercy poured into weary souls.
Bread broken to fill empty stomachs.
The Bread of Life broken to fill empty hearts.
The words of Jesus spoken to confused and frightened disciples.
The Word of God spoken to a deaf and distracted world.

The events and images of Maundy Thursday have long intrigued me. They are simple but far from simplistic, making for captivating narrative and endless layers for interpretation and application. The movement from painful betrayal to extravagant grace, tension between despair and hope, and the outpouring of both sorrow and love hang in every moment. Jesus spends these last hours with his closest friends, observing the festival that is central to their faith and identity, offering final instructions and words of encouragement, reassuring them, and then praying for them. It is a night bright with possibility, even as the shadow of what is about to happen clouds their moments in the upper room and in the garden.

After three years of parables told, miracles witnessed, and wisdom shared, Jesus leaves his disciples with a new commandment, not one explained by a sermon on theories of atonement or commentary about the Law, but demonstrated, as it had been over and over throughout their life together, through his simple yet radical acts of meeting their physical needs. This Word-become-flesh Jesus echoed the love and mercy of God for his embodied disciples, by washing and feeding them. Through the aroma of bread, the taste of wine, the

sensation of water on their skin, the sounds of conversation among friends and the singing of a hymn, Jesus chooses common, even mundane, elements like water, bread, and wine—elements needed for physical life to be sustained and to thrive—to become object lessons for the ways God redeems and nurtures our spirits. Rather than a lofty, philosophical theology lesson meant to instruct about the nature of God or a list of rules meant to affirm God's favor for some while excluding others from the community, Jesus shows who God is by pouring water over tired and dusty feet, by breaking bread and sipping wine, and by linking the hospitality and service to which we are called with the ways God loves and welcomes us.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus said. In fact, it was not an entirely new idea so much as a fulfillment of the purpose God had breathed into the first clay-formed beings shaped in God's image and enlivened with God's Spirit: As I have loved you, love one another. But this "new commandment" was not etched in stone sent down from on high. It did not thunder from a mountainside, flicker in flames that burned without consuming, or roar like flood waters across the land. This commandment to love was felt in the touch of a teacher and friend who bent down to wash their feet. It was smelled and tasted in the bread they ate and the wine they drank. This commandment was love that was poured out of the dirty water of the wash basin, kneaded in dough, and pressed out of grapes. It was love that had to be scrubbed from dirty hands, stretched out of aching muscles, and wiped from sweaty brows. This commandment to love was not just a word but also an action—Love which became flesh, which touched and healed and washed and fed flesh, and which ultimately bore the hatred and rejection of bruises and scars in flesh, in order to redeem us and all of creation. Thanks be to God!

Prayer

This day of dread and betrayal and denial
causes a pause in our busyness.
Who would have thought that you would take
this eighth son of Jesse
to become the pivot of hope in our ancient memory?
Who would have thought that you would take
this uncredentialed
Galilean rabbi
to become the pivot of newness in the world?
Who would have thought that you—
God of gods and Lord of lords—
would fasten on such small, innocuous agents
whom the world scorns
to turn creation toward your newness?

As we are dazzled,
 give us the freedom to resituate our lives in modest,
 uncredentialed, vulnerable places.
We ask for freedom and courage to move out from our nicely
 arranged patterns of security
 into dangerous places of newness where we fear to go.
Cross us by the cross, that we may be Easter marked. Amen.
 –Walter Brueggemann
 From *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*

John 13:1-35:

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. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter

therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival," or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "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."

Join us for Maundy Thursday worship at 6:30 p.m. in the Sanctuary.

A light dinner will be served at 5:30 p.m. in Robbins Hall.

Please contact the church office by 9:00 a.m. on Thursday morning to sign up for dinner.