

Maundy Thursday Sermon

Four for years I tried to be a Quaker. I appreciated their commitment to peace and justice, and they were very good folks. But Quakers do not have sacraments. They have the idea of the sacramental, but there is never water, wine, and bread. It is all spiritual and kind of Platonic, like the smell of food without eating, or love without touching.

I couldn't take it. I kept sneaking off to the 8:00 AM Eucharist at the local Episcopal church. Finally we bid a fond farewell to the Quaker meeting and joined St. Michael's in Newberg, Oregon, where we were warmly received, embraced, and given bread and wine.

Christianity is a tactile religion. You get wet. You get fed. You touch your neighbor and the world with care and kindness. Christianity is a tactile religion.

1 Corinthians 11

Look with me first at the account of the celebration of the Lord's Supper which we have in 1 Corinthians. It is early, the earliest we have in the New Testament. It was written at least ten years before any of the Gospel accounts. This is what the first Christians were saying and doing. It even precedes Paul who wrote it, because he said he received it as a tradition that he was now handing on to the Corinthians.

Paul says that on the night before his death, Jesus took a loaf of bread, probably a large flat loaf, like you get in an Ethiopian restaurant, or that you can still buy in the Old Quarter of Jerusalem, and pulled it apart, breaking it into pieces. "See," he said, "this is my body that is for you, given on your behalf." Then he took an old cup, molded by some craftsman, possibly worn smooth

from common use, filled it with the cool wine of the shared meal, and said, "This cup is the sign of a **new** relationship between God and humankind sealed in my blood. Be eating and be drinking this, in remembrance of me."

These are explicitly tactile actions that bring Christ to present memory. We masticate the bread; we chew it. We sip the sweet wine. Their very physicality bring home to us the physicality of Jesus' death for us. They bodily demonstrate the reality, the concreteness, of his love for us. As John says, "He loved us to the end."

John 13

And then there is the scene in John 13. Did you note that there is no last supper? By the time John wrote, at the end of the New Testament era, the Eucharist was well known. No need to repeat it the story of how it began.

So, instead, we have the blunt, muddy, probably smelly, physicality of the foot washing. Jesus took a towel and a basin and did what any one of the twelve should have, could have, done. It was the job of the household slave, not the master of the house.

Tonight, we should all go tromp around the grounds here and through the flower beds in our bare feet and splash in a few puddles before we wash our feet. Of course, the Greening Committee would have guards armed with rakes and trowels to prevent that. But it would be a vivid, though less sanitary, way to dramatize the demeaning physicality of washing another person's dirty feet, even the feet of a friend. This foot washing is a sacrament of tender loving care, a concrete, tangible, tactile sign of the commitment we have made to love and serve each other, as sisters and brothers, in this family of faith.

So then, when Jesus comes to the meaning of what he has done, at the end of John 13, and gives his disciples the new commandment, he is teaching them and us to love one another in actual practice, by what we do and say, to care for one another, and all our neighbors, practically, visibly, even if the circumstances are muddy, and even if we are uncertain that it is our place. His love was never an abstract ideal, never theoretical, never even just spiritual. His love was up to its elbows in blood, sweat, tears, and dirty water. He asks us to love one another as **he** loved us, in exactly this way, incarnationally.

This love, this as-I-have-loved-you love, is to be enacted and reenacted, as often as necessary, just as we re-enact, over and over again, almost every time we meet, his sacrificial death for us in the Eucharist. There are many theories, even in the New Testament itself, about the meaning of Jesus' death on the Cross. But the explanation I like the best is this: we would never believe the forgiving, generous, past-forgetting, prodigality of God's out-poured love, if that love were just a theory, a doctrine, or a nice idea we would like to believe. We really **couldn't** believe it. But, by the stark physicality of the Cross, God shows, graphically, memorably, the utter extent and depth of his love for us, in that while we were alienated from God, indifferent to God, maybe even angry with God for not existing, or not existing in the way we wanted, yet, nevertheless, in Christ we see God coming and suffering and willingly giving his life for us. This is the passion of the Christ. This is amazing grace.

But then, just as Christ is a sacrament of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, so are we such sacraments. We are signs and representations of the amazing grace of God, grace freely given to us, and grace we now freely extend to each other. As I have loved you, so, in that way, sacrificially love one another.

Embodied love, embodied forgiveness, embodied grace. In bread and wine. In water and towel. In lives poured out for others, his life and ours.

One last thought: it is not just that our love is **like** God's love; it is made **pos-**
sible by God. We love because he first loved us. We forgive, empowered by his forgiveness. In the eucharist we receive Christ's life as a saving and **em-**
powering sacrament, made effective by the Holy Spirit who has come to make God's home within us, to **enable** us to will and to work out a life well-pleasing to God in service to others.

Water, wine, and bread, feet and hands. Come, touch and be touched, eat and drink, receive and serve. Christianity is a tactile religion.

Thanks be to God. Amen