

Tracy Daub  
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John 13:1-15 (Maundy Thursday)

## A LOVE STORY

The story we tell tonight is a love story. Upon a first glance, that may seem hard to believe. After all, in a little while we will read about the betrayal and desertion of friends, about an unjust arrest, about beatings and torture and a brutal execution. This sounds more like a horror story than a love story. On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we listen to the passion story of Jesus' betrayal, abandonment, his arrest, and crucifixion, and we are invited to find ourselves somewhere in that story. Where do we betray Christ and his way? Where have we abandoned him? In what ways do we hurt Christ by the ways we harm or ignore the sufferings of one another? The passion story invites us to ponder our personal brokenness as well as our collective brokenness.

But that is not the whole story. The writer of John's gospel tells us that Jesus, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." And so he wrapped a towel around himself and filled a basin with water and got down on his knees to wash the disciples' stinky, dirty feet. Because he loved them. He loved them not because they finally measured up to all his expectations, or because they had proven themselves worthy and faithful disciples, or because they had shown signs of great goodness. The disciples had not earned Jesus' love through their own great achievements or great integrity or noble loyalty. In fact, at the time when Jesus gets down on his knees and reaches into that bowl of water to wash their feet, he already knows that his beloved friends will fail him. As he washes their feet with the clean warm water, he already knows that one of them will betray him and that all of them will abandon him. He already knows.

Interestingly enough, in the Gospel of John, Jesus both begins and ends his ministry with water. Back at the beginning of John's gospel, we read about Jesus' baptism in water. And now, as he is concluding his ministry, Jesus uses water once again.

Water serves two purposes. Water cleanses. It washes away dirt and odors. In that way, the waters of baptism symbolize a washing away of an old life of brokenness and a rebirth to a new life in Christ. And there, kneeling at the disciples' feet, Jesus was again offering a symbolic gesture of cleansing. He washed not only their feet but also their souls for a new life, a brand new life that would bring them healing and hope.

But water also is a crucial element for life. Nothing can live without water. Water is essential for life. And with this gesture Jesus offers these flawed disciples the gift of life. He already knows their guilt. He knows this in advance. But he offers them both love and forgiveness in advance. They don't have to be perfect to be loved. And we don't have to be perfect to be loved. Instead, while we are yet sinners, Christ waters our dry, thirsty, parched souls with the waters of love and forgiveness--that we may have life, real life.

The other gospel writers don't have this story of the foot washing. Instead, they convey the same message through the story of the Last Supper, where Jesus nourishes his disciples with bread and wine, symbols of his love and forgiveness, so that they might have life. Food and water. The essential ingredients for life. Jesus supplies both so we may have life, not just on the other side of the grave but right here and now, each day as we get out of bed and face the realities of our day.

The passion story will serve no purpose if it doesn't teach us about love. It serves no purpose if all we do is hear this story and shake our heads about how those bad people long ago killed Jesus. Or if we shake our heads with disgust about all those bad people running around

our world today, causing harm and suffering and violence. The passion story will have no impact upon us if we do not see our own culpability. Brokenness abides in us all. We can all find ourselves in the passion story.

And the passion story will serve no purpose if all we do is wallow in guilt and despair about our own brokenness or the fallen nature of our world. Paralyzing guilt or shame or despair about ourselves or the grim nature of humanity does no honor to the passion story. Instead, the passion story is intended to be life-giving. The waters of love are supposed to revive us and restore us to genuine life. The bread and wine at the table are supposed to sustain us with the power of love and grace and move us to genuine life.

As the Racial Justice Task Group of our church has been working to promote activities and classes and events, some of the topics we have confronted in our readings and discussions are the issues of white fragility and white guilt. White fragility is a term used to convey the emotional fragility some white people have when confronted with racism. They become so upset and so defensive they cannot hear what others are trying to express. There is a denial that they could in any way be culpable of racism, conscious or unconscious. Whereas, white guilt describes the way some white people can become stuck in a place of shame and guilt for the racist behaviors of white people. But failure to accept our culpability and brokenness will not lead us to a place of new life. Nor will feelings of guilt lead us to a place of new life. Guilt as a terminal emotion is not constructive. Only love, the love we experience from God, the love that leads us to become something new, can lead us to new life, and lead us to find a better way to live in relationship with all God's people.

God desires the passion story to be life-giving. In this story we learn again that while we are yet sinners, we are loved and forgiven. And that love and forgiveness has the power to raise

us to new life, to free us from guilt and despair and self-delusion, and to lead us down a new path.

The passion story will serve no purpose if it doesn't teach us about love: God's love for us and God's call for us to love one another. After Jesus stood up from washing the disciples' feet, and wiped his hands on his towel, he said to them, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."