

“AROUND THE TABLE”

John 14:1-14 May 21st, 2017

In our reading today, we hear Jesus offering a series of final words, final thoughts, final reflections, and final instructions for his eleven remaining disciples (Judas has left). The setting for this lengthy and personal conversation (known as The “Farewell Discourse”) is around a table in a private home in Jerusalem. It is the night before the crucifixion. And so, as we begin listening to the words of our Lord, let us imagine ourselves there, around the table, in a private space. Just us. No crowds. No accusers. No political figures or priests. No betrayers. Just Jesus and his trusted friends.

Jesus had already told his disciples, before the festival of Passover, that he knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. He knew the time was near, and he wanted to spend his final evening with his disciples. He invited them to share a final meal, a last supper, with him. So here they are, around a table. They’ve eaten dinner, and things have gotten quiet. It’s a small room, dimly lit on this dark night.

According to the gospel writer John, who is telling us this story, during the meal Jesus got up from the table. He brought a basin and a towel, and he knelt down and began to wash the feet of his followers. One by one, he went around the table to each of them.

Well, the disciples, especially Peter, were upset by what he was doing. They felt it ought to be the other way around. But Jesus insisted that he was trying to teach them something important, not just with his words, but by his actions. As he took Peter’s dusty, tired, road-weary foot in his hands, he looked right in Peter’s eyes and said, “No. It’s okay. Just relax and listen. I want you to listen

to me and I want you to remember. Not only should you allow me to wash your feet, but you should wash each other's feet. In fact, you should wash the feet of everyone you meet."

Now, as I was thinking about those words: "wash the feet of everyone you meet" it struck me that perhaps he was encouraging us to do something other than washing the feet of the multitudes! *What do you think he was encouraging us to do as his disciples? How hard would be to actually do that?*

Jesus kept going. He moved on to the next man, knelt before him, and took another foot in his hands. As he washed he said, "I want you to remember that servants are not greater than their masters, nor are messengers greater than the one who sends them."

Remember, Jesus is sitting around the table with his eleven closest friends. He had just washed their feet, as a servant would do for his master. But now he is requesting that they wash each other's feet and those of everyone they meet. He continues to wash their feet but now he talks about servants are not greater than their masters...*What could he mean by that?...*since washing guests' dusty feet was the job of a slave, not the host. Jesus had become a voluntary slave.

In Philippians it is written: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:5-8) In taking the form of a slave to serve others' interest rather than his own, Christ "emptied himself of all but love." Foot washing is a humble service. Teachers were to be imitated and masters obeyed. Jesus explains that following and obeying him means self-giving, loving service.

So this is the scene. This is what has just happened when Peter breaks in and asks Jesus where he is going, and Jesus responds with these very familiar lines that we all know because we hear them read at funerals and memorial services. These deeply personal, heartfelt, painful words. Words of comfort for others, while painful to Jesus, spoken in this most intimate setting, to his disciples. Spoken to his friends with whom he has just shared a meal. Spoken to his followers who have traveled with him for three years, and whose feet he has just washed, one by one. Spoken on the night before his crucifixion and death.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

Can you hear Jesus speaking to you in this most personal way? Can you hear him speaking to you, personally? What do you think he is saying? Do you trust his promise?

We have heard these words of comfort from Jesus at many times and in our lives as Christians. Sometimes it is as part of a funeral or memorial service or it may be as we gather at the edge of a freshly dug grave. At the edge of his own grave, Jesus means to reassure his disciples that his death is not the end but the beginning of the “way,” whose destination is the room he is making for them in God. The disciples just can’t quite grasp this; their disbelief is one that we share with them at times.

On any given Sunday there are pews in our churches that fill with good

people whose hearts are troubled by the fact that the gift of mortal life does not last.

So we begin where Jesus begins. His heart was troubled at the news of Lazarus's death but it was redeemed by his own grief. In John 11:33 it is written: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." He was moved to travel to the tomb of Lazarus and bring him back from the dead. "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:44b)

What would free the human heart from being troubled?..... The world has a multitude of answers. Jesus has only one: *Believe in God, believe also in me* (v.1). John speaks of believing almost exclusively not as something to which one agrees inwardly, but as an outward and active commitment to a person, the person being Jesus. The words of Luther in the Large Catechism in his response to the first Commandment ask what it means to have a God, He answers that God is what you hang your heart upon. Don't you love that?!?!? The heart that is troubled is a heart not hung upon God but hung instead on all the things the world peddles to soothe a troubled heart. Jesus tells the disciples in their time of deep uncertainty, hang your hearts on God; hang your hearts on me.

The next approach Jesus takes deals directly with the gift of another kind of life: eternal life. He tells the disciples that the God on whom they may hang their hearts "has room for them." Robert Jenson writes about God's roominess in relation, not to the space, but to the time that God has for us. "What is time? My answer is created time is room in God's own life. If creation is God's making room in himself, then God must be roomy...this roominess of God should be thought of as his 'time,' that God's eternity is not immunity to time but his having all the time he needs." This metaphor of God's roominess as God's eternity is one

that we can grasp with our hands and our hearts!

What has troubled the disciples' hearts is the very real sense that their time with Jesus has come to an end. We have the same relationship to time: its shortness robs us of those we love. The country song "One More Day with You" by Diamond Rio is about having one more day with the one we love, one more sunset ... but then we'd wish for another day—one more day would not be enough. It is God's grace to us that we can be the ones who hang our hearts on the God who has all the time God needs for us and for those we love. The place Jesus is preparing in God's own life is *eternal life*, which, as Robert Jenson often says, is simply another name for God. As in the beginning of this Gospel God has come to dwell with us in Jesus Christ, exploring the content of the Christian hope contained in the promise that we will dwell through him in God. Therefore our hearts need never be troubled.

What does this promise mean to you in your life?

Here is the good news!! Becoming one with Christ is not something we do. It is God's work. It is something that God in Christ does for us. Our unity with Christ is the result of Jesus reaching out to touch—to embrace our feet in his hands, to embrace our lives in his arms—each of us, one at a time. Jesus reaches out and draws us to him. It is Christ who makes us one. He makes us one by uniting us, first to himself, and second, to one another. (But that's a topic for next week.)

We only have to make a decision about whether we will trust him. Our role is to decide whether we will allow him to embrace us, draw us to him, into unity with God and the Holy Spirit, and into unity with one another. Our role is to say yes to his invitation to be creatures of this community of faith rather than individualism. But we have to say yes to the invitation of Jesus. We have to allow

ourselves to be embraced and allow others to be embraced alongside us. You have said yes to this each time you pass the peace of Christ to your neighbor—whether it is by a handshake or a hug.

This isn't essentially about what we can do. It is about what God does for us that we can't do for ourselves. We have received the invitation.

Can we open our hearts, our minds, and our spirit to the One who has issued the invitation?

Can we believe into him?

Can we allow ourselves to be embraced into Christ's heart?

Can we allow ourselves to be embraced into God's home?

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.