

MAUNDY THURSDAY
Exodus 12:1-14
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Pastor Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
April 1, 2021

Bishop Michael Curry is passionate about the power of love, in part because love is what saved him as a boy. He was just ten years old when his world turned upside down. His mother had a stroke and later died. Nothing could ever be the same for him and his sister, but the close-knit African American church community in Buffalo, New York gathered around their family and carried them in active, helpful love.

Josie Robbins, a high school principal, not only did their laundry and cooked meals, she took the kids shopping and came to all the family events. Erna Clark took them back and forth to school each day. Dr. and Mrs. Bullock had the kids over for study time and checked their homework meticulously. As Michael says, “These folks weren’t just loving on us; they were on top of our every move. They were *tough*.”

Yet tender too. Michael remembers that on the day of his mother’s burial, it was bitter cold in the cemetery. He says, “It was a cold that wanted to crush you... and as they lowered her body into the ground, I started crying. I was standing next to Mrs. Bullock, and she pulled me into her.... I felt the soft, scratchy hairs of her wool coat on my cheek and rubbed against them. Solid. We rocked and rocked.”

And he reflects, “The way Mrs. Bullock pulled me in, her coat a soft landing for a boy’s suffering—this is how we lived through the whole time of Mommy’s sickness and her death. We were always resting in the loving hands of our church community. Which is to say, God’s hands.” (*Love is the Way*, Bishop Michael Curry, pp. 32, 36)

Looking back, he says, “This period could have made a traumatic mark on me. I could have lost my childhood. But that’s not what happened.” (31) Instead, love stepped in to help.

Today, a lot of people ask Bishop Curry how they can find God’s love. And he says, “There’s a simple way to connect to God, anytime you feel like it. If God is love, and love is an action, you’ve only got to get out there and *do* it. You’ve got to get out there and *receive* it.” (28-9)

This is the simple truth Jesus conveyed at that Last Supper in Jerusalem. God’s love is found in giving and receiving. His actions were so memorable that people have been pondering them for centuries.

As guest of honor at that supper, certain things were expected of Jesus. He would occupy the head of the table. He'd be served first and command the attention of everyone else, who were seated by order of their status. After eating, Jesus would direct a time of conversation around the table. The disciples were comfortable with this pattern of authority. Jesus was their rabbi and they looked to him for teaching and direction, especially on this important night.

But this time the rabbi taught not through words, but actions. He brilliantly defied convention. He left the head of the table. He knelt on the floor. He took a basin of water and a towel -- things used by slaves. He washed the feet of each person in turn, soaked away the dirt and dung of the roads they had traveled. He took his time. He cleansed them, tended to them. Through his hands they experienced a gentle kindness and practical care they would never forget.

It was active, helpful love. So beautiful, and so disorienting. Their world turned upside down. Normally disciples sit at the feet of their teacher, looking up. Instead, Jesus was kneeling at their feet, and they were looking down. Peter blurted out what everyone felt -- "This is all wrong!" And, exactly as the brilliant rabbi intended, a teaching conversation opened up.

Everyone had a stake in this discussion now. Every person had a hunger to understand. Every person had felt the touch of Jesus' hands, every person had received his tender care, and now they had to figure out what to do with that. And Jesus began to teach them: This is the shape of your life from now on. Up till now, you've given honor and attention to me, your rabbi. From now on, you show honor and attention to one another. "As I have loved you, now love one another." In this way, you will share in me, and I will share in you, and all the world will know my love.

I imagine the conversation went on quite a while that night, and the conversation is still going on today. Because we all have a stake in this matter, don't we. Every single one of us has been touched by the hands of Christ. We have been washed in baptism, cleansed from sin, forgiven and claimed and blessed through the unconditional love of our Lord. We have shared in Christ's sacred meal at the table of Holy Communion. We've been made part of Christ's own body. Christ's spirit and character are yearning to be expressed through who we are -- so the world can know the beauty of who God is.

And for all those people around us, and among us, who are asking: *How can I find God's love?* We are part of the answer. Because "If God is love, and love is an action, you've only got to get out there and *do* it. You've got to get out there and *receive* it."

Jesus didn't only give the disciples a simple teaching that night; he gave them – and us— a calling. A calling to love in a way that honors and helps the other. That holds the well-being of the other in highest regard. This is something we can only learn in the doing, loving one another as we would wish to be loved. Loving one another as Christ has loved us.

Jesus showed us that love is never just a kind or tender feeling. Love is a work of the heart but even more, love is a work of the hands.

And this kind of love turns the world upside down. Privilege is set aside. Prejudice is overcome. Polarization is surmounted. Isolation is bridged. Systems of oppression are sent crumbling down, for the sake of loving and serving the whole human family.

Through his own actions Jesus showed us how to serve all people, and in this way discover God's love.

Jesus served the priests and the prostitutes, the Jews and the Gentiles, the insiders and the outsiders. Jesus touched lepers and dined with sinners. Jesus served miraculous meals to the hungry, and he offered healing to everyone from the highest official to the lowliest person on the street. He allowed himself to be touched and kissed and betrayed and beaten, and finally even murdered, to demonstrate God's persistent love for all humanity, and God's unquenchable commitment to every child of earth.

(johnpavlovitz.com)

What a privilege, to share in Christ's saving love, to serve one another in Christ's name. We offer our hearts, we offer our hands, for our Lord's use.

Amen.