

Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020
Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Konrad Lorenz was an Austrian scientist whose research into animal behavior ended up winning a Nobel Prize. In one of his most famous studies, he described how baby ducks and geese “imprinted” on their mother, and how in the absence of a mother duck or goose, the baby birds could imprint on people or other animals, even on colored plastic balls. Lorenz believed that the birds are “programmed” this way to recognize and stick close to their parents, both for food and for safety. He imprinted quite a number of ducks and geese on himself, and would take them with him out walking, or even swimming. He became known in his hometown as “the man who walks with geese.”

I think that at the heart of this journey we are making through Holy Week, it’s really very much about Jesus “imprinting” us on himself, and on his way of love and compassion, so that we follow him and our lives bear the impression of his love. The whole of these three days shows us the depth of Jesus’ love and commitment to us. As he shares a final meal with his followers, as he submits to betrayal and arrest, to condemnation and death and burial, he shows us how, for the sake of love, as Son of God he shares our human experience of life to the very end, so that God can hold each and every one of us in love through everything this life brings—including being alone, afraid, grieving, in pain. In this way, Jesus wants to place an indelible mark, a permanent imprint, on our hearts.

And tonight, as our Gospel reading lets us listen in to Jesus’ final meal with his disciples, we hear Jesus imprinting his way of love on them—and perhaps on us too. During the supper, Jesus got up from the table, took off his cloak, and tied a towel around his waist. He poured water into a bowl and began to wash his disciples’ feet. It was an absolutely shocking thing for him to do. The disciples were accustomed to Jesus doing and saying surprising things, but they weren’t ready for this. This was a job that could be required only of slaves. But Jesus does this to break once and for all the competitiveness that existed between them, the one-ups-manship that characterized all of their interactions, so that it could be replaced with love, to make them a community where they cared for each other, tended to each other’s’ needs.

Jesus had spent his whole ministry teaching them his way of love and forgiveness, and showing them what that sort of love looked like in action. And this night, while sharing his last meal with them, Jesus imprinted that love on their hearts. He told them: “You call me Lord and Teacher, which I am. So if I have shown you this way of love and service, then this is the way you will show love and service to each other.”

And as we share the story of that last meal, and all the things that Jesus said and did that night, Jesus imprints his way of love on our hearts too. In our time of worry and anxiety, Jesus reminds us that love is the only thing that makes life beautiful, really the only thing that makes life bearable. It's why the stories of healthcare workers and first responders, who are stepping up to care for others, even at great personal risk, are so inspiring. Love is the only thing that matters. So Jesus marks us with his way of love, which changes how we live our lives, how we treat each other, what we consider worthwhile and what is just not worth our time. Love opens our hearts to meet others with compassion, with empathy, with acceptance, as well as honesty and accountability. Love means being vulnerable to the way things actually are, it means considering more than our own wants and needs, but also our neighbors' wants and needs—even the earth's needs.

Tonight, Jesus imprints his way of love on us, marks our hearts with his way of love and compassion and forgiveness, so that we will recognize him as the only one worth following, the only one who leads in the way that leads to peace, and joy, and hope. Jesus imprints his way of love on us so that we can follow him through all of the uncertainty and trouble of life, all the way into God's eternal embrace of love. Thanks be to God. Amen.