



April 9, 2020 • Maundy Thursday

John 17

Sermon: The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey

It is Maundy Thursday, and this homily is intended to accompany you and those you love around your dinner table this evening. A number of us in the Christ Church Detroit community will be gathering for dinner in our own homes and saying special blessings over the bread and the wine and the food that we are so blessed to have on our tables. We'll be sharing some scripture with one another and will be praying around our tables. A number of us might also be making phone calls to friends or video conferencing with our loved ones in other homes, reaching for ways to be connected—in relationship and prayer—on this holy night.

Usually, on Maundy Thursday when we gather together as a congregation, we hear the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus, on his final night with his disciples, shows what it is to love one another in humble and utter service by washing their feet. In response, the disciples say “Not only my feet but also my head. Wash all of me” (John 13:9). We also hear in that passage Jesus commanding his disciples with the new commandment, “to love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). As I think about that passage, I also recall the words of Jeremy Taylor who was a theologian writing and speaking in England in the early 1600s. About Maundy Thursday, he writes about Jesus:

“And he chose to wash their feet rather than their head, that he might have the opportunity of a more humble posture, and a more apt signification of his charity. Thus God lays everything aside, that God may serve his servants; heaven stoops to earth, and one abyss calls upon another, and **the miseries of [humanity], which were next to infinite, are excelled by a mercy equal to the immensity of God**” (*The Whole Works of Jeremy Taylor*, 2:268-29).

These words might jump out to you as they do to me. Might it feel in this strange time that the miseries of humanity are indeed next to infinite? Or that we certainly fear they will become so, more and more? Might we be acquainted with that phrase, “the miseries of humanity being next to infinite”?

Tonight, Jesus' words echo to us and invite us to remember that our biggest fears are excelled only by a mercy and a love that is equal to the immensity of God. If that is so, my friends, whom should we fear? Why should we fear? God is with us in our misery and in our uncertainty and our fear and our grief and our pain. And, God's mercy and love are even bigger than that.

Tonight, I am inviting us to read at our dinner tables not the thirteenth chapter of John (since we cannot gather together and wash one another's feet) but actually the seventeenth chapter. The seventeenth chapter of John brings us Jesus' final words with his disciples before Jesus departs for the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' final words that he says in the presence of his disciples are

prayer. That is the entirety of this seventeenth chapter of John. Maybe you have the seventeenth chapter handy, or maybe you can find it later. It is a blessing to read that chapter and, moreover, a blessing to read it to out loud somebody that you love and to let the words wash over our ears.

Hear Jesus pray, “Holy Father, watch over them in your name...that they will be one just as we are one” (John 17:11). Jesus prays fervently—and repeatedly—that we, that all of God’s people, would be one. And of course we are one, but we don’t know that, we don’t realize that, do we? He prays fervently—his last words in the presence of his disciples are—that we all would know thoroughly in our bones that we are one, that we are all one together, and that we are one together with God who created us. “Watch over them that they will be one. I pray that they will be one” (John 17:21).

These days during this crisis, they do bring to light how united we are, how connected we are. And, of course, that raises our fear of how easy, how impossibly and incredibly easy, it is for this virus to spread—because we are one and we are so connected. Each of us and all of us throughout the world share one breath, we share the same air, we share one blood, we share water, we share the same food, we share life itself. We are alive because of—and with—one another. We are alive all together in God.

We are one. We **are**...one.

In these times when our unity might actually bring us more fear and more uncertainty about what is to come, let Jesus’ words, the last words that he shared in the presence of the disciples, also remain with you. He prays, “Make them one, so that your love for me will be in them and I myself will be in them” (John 17:23,26).

Remember that God’s love is in each of us, and remember how big that love is: “equal to the immensity of God” in Jeremy Taylor’s words. We must realize—this holy night begs us to realize through and through—that even though the miseries may seem and may be infinite, and that the misery, the fear, and the uncertainty may be tremendous, they **are** excelled by a mercy and a love that is equal to the immensity of God. That is the very, very good news that remains with us tonight.

Right after Jesus prays, he leaves with the disciples and crosses into the Kidron Valley, and he goes into the Garden of Gethsemane. And his story continues. We will hear that eighteenth chapter of John together at noon on Good Friday, tomorrow. For the time being, let us pray, knowing that God the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are praying with us and watching over us, now and always.

Let us pray. “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. Amen” (An Order for Compline, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 134).