

A Maundy Thursday 4.6.23

John 13:1-17, 31-35

Focus Statement: Jesus risked loving us.

Some of you got a preview of this story at last week's midweek service, but it bears repeating. The retired worship professor at my seminary passed away recently, and one of my classmates was recounting being at his funeral. As you would expect from a liturgically minded seminary professor of worship, every detail of his funeral was planned down to the t, with notes in the margin of the bulletin explaining why he had made various decisions, picked certain hymns or scriptures, etc. One detail of the funeral stood out to her and stood out to me in her retelling. For communion the only option was one common cup. No intinction, no individual glasses, just everyone drinking from the same vessel. He made this choice, he noted in the bulletin, because the Eucharist should always be a bit of a risk, should always make everyone just a little bit uncomfortable.

The Eucharist should always be a risk. That phrase stuck with me, because it's not something I often think about, that this meal is a risk. Honestly, as a preacher, I find preaching in a Eucharistic tradition, that is a community that celebrates communion every Sunday, a bit of a relief, because I know that if the sermon flops miserably, you're still going to have an encounter with Jesus in the bread and the wine. We do this every single Sunday. Same words, same actions. I could say the words of institution in my sleep, you probably could to, you've heard them enough times. I even walk the same way around the table every week, start in the same place. Outside of the off chance that some wine might get sloshed and stain my alb, what risk does this meal possibly pose?

So I love what my retired worship professor did in inserting something into the familiarity that shook everyone up a little bit and made everyone just a bit uncomfortable. Because the Eucharist really is a risk. Every encounter with Jesus is a risk. There is a risk you will be transformed in this meal, a risk you will be changed in this meal. Even in the familiar, week to week sameness of it, we don't know how this meal is changing us.

One thing the Maundy Thursday reading does is it opens us up to see that risk. In John's Gospel, unlike in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Last Supper takes place on the night before the Passover. So this is not a big festive meal, this is just dinner. This is just, I don't know if your families have this, but in my family I remember like the night before Christmas Eve, we'd have spent the whole day prepping and cooking and cleaning and doing all those things you do before having a bunch of people over. And inevitably we'd be waiting on a plumber, because someone put potato skins down the garbage disposal, or we'd be rushing to the grocery store because something key was forgotten, or insert small, insignificant crisis here. And all of a sudden it's eight o'clock at night, and no one's thought about food, and we end up with my grandfather's favorite thing, a quick run to Taco Bell of all places. That was the Last Supper in John's Gospel, whatever the first century equivalent of quick dinner before the big feast the next day would be.

This meal we just read about found the disciples sitting casually around the table. There was certainly some tension in the air. Ever since Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead a few chapters earlier, everyone knew that the religious leadership was looking for a way to get rid of Jesus. And Jesus himself had mentioned in conversation with some Greeks that,

his “hour has come.” But still, this evening was just an evening, like so many others the disciples had shared around the table with Jesus.

That was, it was just a meal like so many others, until Jesus did something strange. Until he “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself... poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples feet and wipe them with the towel that was tied to him.” It is hard to really state just what an absurd posture this would have been at the time for a teacher and master to do for his disciples. One of the commentaries I was reading this week pointed out that not only was foot washing a servant’s job, it is more accurate to say that it was usually performed by lowly female servants. The commentator wrote: “As much as it pains me as a woman commentator to say it, the fact that Jesus takes on the task of a female servant is extra humiliating, especially in the eyes of the disciples.” She asserted that Peter’s call that Jesus first wash none of him and then all of him was an attempt to force Jesus out of the role of servant and back into the role of master, in trying to make the action not a foot washing but a baptism, but Jesus held firm. This humiliating role reversal is part of the lesson Jesus was trying to teach, as he went on to explain. ““Do you know what I have done to you?” Jesus asked once he had finished. “You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” He then went on to offer a *mandatum*, the Latin for commandment, fun fact, where we get the term Maundy Thursday, this is commandment Thursday. A new *mandatum*, a new commandment, that the disciples love one another as Jesus has loved them. The sort of love that is modeled in foot washing, in taking the most lowly place in order to serve others.

So we're not doing foot washing tonight. We're not doing it for several good structural and practical reasons, the largest of which being we have one thing the first century did not have, and that is a working knowledge of germ theory, and Pastor Ed and I discussed that, as much as the Eucharist is and should be a risk, eating food and washing feet was not the sort of risk meant by that statement. But we are going to serve one another, we are going to practice this risky act of sharing, and, and let me be clear, it is going to be awkward. As everyone starts to wrap up eating, you will be invited to bus your tables, take bowls, plates, etc. to the carts over there, as we sing Bread of Life from heaven and enter into a spirit of preparation for communion. Then we will hear and say those so familiar words, pray the prayer we hold deep in our hearts, and generally go through the familiar patterns of communion. But here's where we're going to take a bit of risk this evening, and make things just a little bit uncomfortable. We are going to serve communion family style this evening, which means you are going to serve communion to each other. After the bread and wine have been broken and blessed, Pastor Ed and I will bring around to each table a plate with a hunk of bread, a pouring chalice, and a handful of glasses. And you will commune each other around the table. And, I promise you, because it has happened to me every time I have experienced communion this way, it will be awkward and jumpy. You will have a mouthful of bread while you try to commune the next person, or someone will be staring at you while you chew. Wine might get sloshed on the table. Wine might get sloshed on the floor. Which, Trinity folk, you know I've already preached a sermon on the fact that the carpet is stained so, please don't pour wine on the floor, but if it happens, it happens. This will not be the smooth, easy familiarity of communion around the table. And I invite you to

lean into it. Take all the time you need to chew, no matter how big a piece it is. Taste the wine, sit with it, smell it. Look each other in the eyes as you say the words, this is the body of Christ for you, this is the blood of Christ for you. Because here's the thing, dear people of God. Serving others is a risk. Loving the world is a risk. Being vulnerable and human and alive in the bringing of the kingdom of God is a risk. Church, this place, this table, is, hopefully, at it's best, a safe place where we, like Jesus' disciples can practice what it feels like to serve and be served, to love and be loved, so we can follow in the example set for us and love the world as Jesus loved.

I've talked enough for this evening, I want to turn it over for you to talk to each other. As you're finishing up your meal, I invite you to discuss around your tables a couple of questions. First off a basic couple. What caught your attention in this passage? What did you notice? What did you wonder? How have you experienced risk in love? Has someone taken a risk in loving you, have you taken a risk in loving someone? How have you experienced the risk of service? Have you ever experienced church as a risk? Can you imagine how it could be a risk for others? How can you help lessen the risk for some and challenge yourself?