

“TO ALL WHO WOULD COME”  
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Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Lately I’ve been getting a lot of invitations in the mail to special events – weddings, showers, graduations. It’s that time of year. If you’ve ever had to plan an event, you know how hard it can be to decide who to invite. Usually, you have to deal with numbers, you can only invite so many people because of space or budget, which means that you really have to think hard about who you want to be there. Chances are that you end up with those who are closest to you on the list – those whom you love, those who have been supportive, those who have always been there for you. Those are the ones you want around you on your special day, at your special event.

Well, tonight, friends, we’re remembering a very special event in the life of Jesus – His last meal with His disciples before He would walk the way of the cross. This was the last time He would have time to spend with them – He knew it and they knew it. So you would think, wouldn’t you, that Jesus would choose to spend that time with those who loved Him, who were supportive and always there for Him.

Yet, look at the guest list. Sitting around the table in that Upper Room was one who would betray Him for thirty pieces of silver, one would deny ever knowing Him, and many who would scatter and run when things got too tough. Those were the ones around the table that night with Jesus.

Did Jesus lecture them, berate them, or turn His back on them? No, He served them, and served them in a powerful, yet humble way. He took on the role of the lowliest servant and knelt down and washed their feet caked with dirt. And then He shared a meal with them. When, by all rights, Jesus could have turned away from these who would turn away from Him, instead He knelt before them, served them, cared for them, and loved them.

One preacher put it so well, when she wrote: “Knowing what Judas would do, Jesus did not bar him from the table. He set a place for him, he ordered food for him, he ate out of the same dish with him. Judas was included until he excluded himself, which gives this new covenant some real bite. When Jesus holds up the cup and offers what is in it as the fluid of forgiveness, he is not talking to people with a short list of minor sins. He is talking to people who will turn him in, will

scatter to the four winds at the first sign of trouble, and who will swear they never knew him. He is talking to people who should have been his best friends on earth, who will turn out not to have a loyal bone in their bodies, and he is forgiving them ahead of time, as surely as if he had said, 'I know who you are. I know you will not be innocent of the blood in this cup, but I will not let that come between us. Look, here, I bless it. I make it my gift to you. Let it mean life to you, not death. Let my life become your life, through the blood of this covenant.'" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, "Blood Covenant," p. 63.

It's an incredible story to read, this last meal in the Upper Room, this reaching out in love to those who would, in so many ways, fail Jesus. It's difficult to comprehend a love so deep that it kneels down and serves those who fall short, those who betray, those who deny. We admire so much the depth of love Jesus had for them, it even moves us to tears, because in our heart of hearts, we know that Jesus would have treated us the same way that night, us, sinners ourselves, sinners who disappoint Him, sinners who, far too often, betray and deny Him ourselves. So, for that reason, we love this story – we know He would have us at that table too, and would love us and care for us as well.

But there's more to the story than that – far more. Because the last thing Jesus said to the disciples that night, and He says to us as well, is "now you do it. Now you go and love and serve others, you go and be kind to everyone, you go and sit down with those who might disappoint you, you go and welcome outsiders, you go and share my love extravagantly and in abundance, without qualification. You go and welcome all who would come. Now, you go, because, Jesus says, as you do people will remember me, and will give God the glory. If you want my life to live on, you go now and do what I have done for you this night – love and serve everyone – open wide your arms – love and serve as I have loved and served you.

Oh, that we would do that, but we are so prone in this day and age to put conditions on those we want to be around. We are so prone to put up walls and keep some in and others out. We are so prone to want to be with people like us, and sadly, so prone to pronounce judgment on others. The other day in the Lenten Lunch and Learn class we talked about how we so easily assume we know people, when we have no clue what they've gone through, or why they do what they do – yet we judge or pre-judge them all the same – and leave them out of our circle of care in the process.

The wonderful preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story that made me think of that. She says that one summer she and her husband Ed went on a hiking trip with fifteen other people and a trip leader (none of whom they knew ahead of time). The hikers were from all over the United States, and she said, on the first day of hiking it quickly became apparent that they were of all different skill levels, in terms of their hiking ability – some were old, some were young, some were fit and

others not so much. But they had to work together as a team to scale some of the heights ahead of them.

Unfortunately, Taylor says, they quickly learned that there was one member of the group who was a real challenge to them all. She, in the words of Taylor, “was the eldest member of the group, the heaviest, and the most unpleasant. She liked to walk alone at the rear of the group, which was just as well (Taylor says), since she had an irritating habit of listening in on other people’s conversations and then breaking in to correct their grammar, geography, history, botany, or any of the other subjects about which she knew so much.”

She would complain about the pace, she would complain if she wasn’t allowed to have a full hour for the lunch break, she would complain about the places they stopped to rest – they were either too steep, or too rocky, or whatever. Anyway, it didn’t take long for the rest of the group to begin to dislike this cantankerous hiker.

At any rate, on the fifth day of the hike, the group got, as Taylor put it, “good and lost.” It took them close to ten hours walking over three mountains to get to their camp, and when they finally arrived, cold, wet and crabby in the near dark of evening, they discovered to their horror that that woman was not with them.

As they talked together, the man who was supposed to have stuck with her, said that hours earlier as he had walked with her, and tried to encourage her to stay close, she started throwing rocks at him, and told him to leave her alone – which he apparently did, and so no one had seen her in close to eight hours.

Well, the trip leader told them all to hunker down, start a fire and have some food, and he would go and look for her. For several anxious hours they huddled together and waited, and then, out of the dark, came this woman and the trip leader, both looking totally exhausted.

Here’s what Barbara had to say: “When she stumbled into camp hanging on to her shepherd, those of us who had despised her at noon fell all over her in the dark, petting her and hugging her and welcoming her home, pressing mugs of hot chocolate into her hands and oatmeal cookies into her pockets. No one thought to ask her if she was going to be a nicer person from now on, or whether she had learned her lesson. We were too glad to have her back. Imagining her out there in the dark, we had all felt more than a little lost ourselves, so finding her was as good as being found.”

Taylor finishes by saying, “She acted rather nonchalant about the whole thing, if you ask me, but the next morning she was up and dressed and on the trail before any of us, and from that day on she was part of the flock. Not everybody’s favorite member, by any means, but part of the flock. Maybe it was getting lost that

changed her – although she denied even a moment’s fear during her ordeal - but then again, maybe it was being found that did the trick.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, “The Lost and Found Department,” p. 150.

Friends, none of us likes being lost, and there’s nothing like the feeling of being found. When we do as Jesus did – when we welcome all, when we kneel down and serve, when we offer care and compassion, when we don’t judge others but simply care for them – it’s like they’re being found. And when we do that, we remind them of Jesus, and His love for them, a love so deep that He was willing to die for them, for you and for me.

In a world that invites us to hold everybody at arms’ length, that invites us to think in terms of who’s in and who’s out, that is “everyone for himself or herself,” let us instead, answer the call of Christ to open wide our arms and our hearts, and love one another as He has loved us. May it be so.

Amen.