

## Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Jesus loves you.

Before I started believing in God, the most common phrase people used to try to convert me was, “Jesus loves you.” I didn’t understand how someone who had been gone from earth for thousands of years could love me. And in what way? Like a sister? Like a child? Like a spouse? And if I didn’t even believe that Jesus ever existed, why would I care that he loves me?

In our gospel today, we hear two stories about Jesus’ love. First, we hear that “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” And then, at the end of our gospel reading, we get the new commandment to love one another just as Jesus loved the disciples.

In English, we only have one word for love... and often, at least in this culture, we put romantic love above other kinds of love, as if the love you have for your friends and family is somehow less valid or less important. As if you need romantic love in your life to be a complete person. But what kind of love is Jesus calling us to have? New Testament scholar Bruce Malina writes, “Since in first-century Mediterranean society there was no term for an internal state that did not entail a corresponding external action, love always meant doing something that revealed one’s attachment – that is, actions supporting the well-being of the persons to whom one is attached.” In other words, love without works is dead.

So when we say “I love you”, or “Jesus loves you”, or even “the church loves you”, the words fall flat unless we are simultaneously supporting the well-being of that person. This is why I believe that communal care is such a core part of the mission of the church: we love each other, because Jesus loves us, and also because we are attached to each other, and we help each other survive.

I didn’t grow up going to church, but I remember watching a lot of Mr. Rogers, so close enough. He understood that love is not roses and sunsets... instead, he insisted that “love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun, like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.”

When well-meaning Christians tried to convince me that Jesus loved me, I never believed them. Because I often saw them use these words as weapons- against queer people, women, and basically anyone they disagreed with. Sometimes when people say “Jesus loves you” what they really mean to say is, “you should be straight”, “you should act more like what I think a girl or boy acts like”, “I don’t understand you and I’m not going to try to”. “Jesus loves you” becomes a form of violence rather than healing. I had to experience God’s love for myself before I understood that loving Jesus, and accepting his love, is less about weaponized theology and more about the daily acts of compassion that make us human. Someone recently told me I have a ‘high Christology’, meaning that I like to emphasize the divine nature of Jesus. I think that’s true. Remember, Jesus is the man about whom John the Baptist proclaimed, “He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” (John 1:27).

Yet the acts of Jesus that convince me to love him are the ones that make him so human. Tonight we remember how he made the mundane acts of eating and washing into acts of great love. For we know that even though Jesus had full equality with God, he chose to humble himself as a slave (Phil. 2:7).

What can we do, we who definitely don't have full equality with God in authority or power? There are ways that God's love manifests on this earth, especially among those who aren't always treated as equal human beings. For example, transgender people are 22 times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population. Trans people face discrimination in employment, housing, and everyday life. Yet the trans community has organized itself to provide life-saving love in the form of a suicide prevention hotline called Trans Lifeline.

It's staffed entirely by transgender people who are trained to non-judgmentally listen and support people who are suffering in spirit. Trans Lifeline loves people as they are, right here and right now, and the volunteers choose to humble themselves and become listeners. They are willing to see and hear the un-pretty parts of people's lives in order to love them, and to support their survival.

Tonight we will wash each other's feet as a way to show our love for one another as disciples of Jesus. We might struggle to love each other perfectly, but by following the example of Jesus, we learn to love through being vulnerable, together, in community. Church should be a place where you can be vulnerable, because Jesus wants to help us survive.

So, friends and fellow disciples, let's help one another survive. Let's be loving in a real, tangible, uncomfortable way and let's support each other's feet and hearts and spirits. Because if we can't be vulnerable here, if we can't cry out to Jesus here, if we can't love one another as Jesus loves us here, where can we?