

## Maundy Thursday, 2018.

We began our Holy Week observance this past Sunday with the Liturgy of the Palms. And almost the very first thing we did was pray this beautiful prayer: Assist us mercifully with your help, O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the *contemplation* of those mighty acts, whereby you have given us life and immortality; through Jesus Christ our Lord. The word that I cling to here is “contemplation”—a good round word that I want to curl up inside of. It conjures images of a Holy Week spent on kneelers, or perhaps walking a garden labyrinth while reciting prayers and psalms. Far from the hectic recruitment of volunteers, selling people on my kooky seating idea for Maundy Thursday, and proofreading endless bulletins that are the stuff of my actual Holy Week. A contemplative Holy Week appeals to the monastic hidden deeply inside of all of us.

And then almost immediately after we have finished this prayer, just when we are poised for breathing exercises and Ignatian-style immersion in the interior world of the gospel, we take off on a boisterous, raggedy procession through the church lawn and kick off Palm Sunday with one of our most bouncy and joyful hymns. Holy Week doesn't stay joyful and boisterous, but it does continue to emphasize uncommon liturgical moving. Even when we're not moving, the readings have an almost gross preoccupation with embodiment that seems oxymoronic after we've begun by asking for help contemplating. The contemplation appropriate to Holy Week is a profoundly *embodied* contemplation: we march, wash feet, eat, process, kneel, and do an intensified version of our usual liturgical calisthenics of stand/sit/kneel/repeat. And this bodily contemplation is never more pronounced than it is tonight, Maundy Thursday.

In a fever-dream of quixotic gospel harmonization, the authors of the prayer book have crammed together the institution of the Lord's Supper and the new commandment to love one another, sacramentalized in the washing of feet. Food and feet, and that food being itself body and blood. There is so much body-ness in this service that it can feel cluttered, and so it's maybe helpful to cut through the clutter and remember that the whole point of this is love—Christ's love for us refracted through us into love for others. The new commandment, to love each other as Christ loves us is the founding charter and constitution of the Christian church and the thesis

statement of Holy Week. We hear the command to share Christ's love, and then the rest of the week is a demonstration of what that love looks like.

Tonight it looks like humble service that deliberately undermines hierarchies of honor and power, and the fellowship, shared vulnerability, and generosity of sharing a meal together. It looks like self-giving that has no bottom. Tomorrow night it looks like speaking the truth without violence or fear, and in response to being made the victim of violence, just speaking the truth some more. Saturday night it will look first like all the stories through salvation history of God emptying out the divine self for our sake, and then finally like victory over death and the grave.

Christian love is an embodied love. It involves using our bodies and it serves the bodies of others. And so contemplating that love by which we have been made alive, and which we are called to share, necessarily involves our bodies. It cannot be adequately contemplated locked away in a prayer closet, with our spirit soaring away beyond the clouds for a telepathic chat with the Holy Spirit. I mean, that sounds great and if you can do that, keep it up. But also we must undertake the contemplation of getting on our knees with a towel to scrub the grit off of someone's feet—or of sharing a holy meal with the hungry.

If an embodied love is the whole point, then what we are doing tonight is essentially practicing. We learn here what we then do in the world. We learn here what it is to be generous, humble, and disdainful of hierarchies that would elevate us over others. We learn here how to get dirty in the service of others. These skills then enable us to befriend the friendless, house the homeless, and share meals with the hungry. These are the skills it takes to share Christ's love with the world.

Our embodied contemplation of divine love always calls us out to love God's world.

Assist us mercifully O Lord God of our salvation, that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts whereby you have given us life and immortality, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.