

To the End

When you get together with family or longtime friends, doesn't it usually involve food? Whether it's a time of celebration—a holiday, a birthday, a wedding—or a sad occasion, if there's been a death? In times of joy and in times of sorrow, being with the ones you care most about and breaking bread with them just naturally go together.

I think that's how it was in Jesus' time, too. In the years that Jesus and his first disciples have been together, they've shared countless suppers. They've gone through the rituals of preparing the meal, of laying out the utensils, of lighting the lamps. Anticipating the moment when they'll draw near to one another. When they'll gather around the table as the sun sinks low in the west and the twilight deepens. When they'll share fellowship. Closeness. Intimacy.

In a lot of ways, this supper is like so many they've shared before. But this evening is different. Shadows lengthen. Darkness encroaches. There's a sense of profound change in the room. There's a sense that something is being irrevocably

altered. There's a sense that nothing is ever going to be the same as it has been.

In this reading from John's Gospel, we're told that Jesus knows his time to return to the Father has come. His hour has come. We're told that he who has *loved his own who were in the world...loved them to the end*.

And during our time together on this Holy Thursday, let's reflect on that. What does it mean that Jesus loves *to the end*?

I think there are several different ways of understanding this statement. Let's start with the simplest one.

Jesus loves to the end of his life. The writer of the Fourth Gospel describes himself as *the disciple Jesus loved*. But of course, Jesus loved them *all*. Every one of them.

And Jesus' love isn't limited to those inside the community of believers. Jesus loves tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus loves sinners. Jesus loves the blind and the lame and the leper. Jesus loves the outcast and the oppressed. Jesus has loved the least, the last, and the lost, all through his earthly life and ministry. Now, on this night, his departure is very near.

But Jesus loves to the end. You and I have been given the assurance that Jesus' loving to the end means *loving to the end*

of time. That's very good news! His love is not just for people of one particular time and place, but for people of *all* times and places.

Jesus loves *you*! Loves you so much that he intercedes for you. Pleads for you. Goes to bat for you. Loves you not only beyond the end of *his* earthly life, but beyond the end of yours, as well. Loves you so much that he's promised to come back to you. The love of Jesus Christ never ends.

And this everlasting love has a purpose. A goal. The Greek word for *end* also means *goal*. *Jesus loves to the end*—the goal—*that you and I will respond to his love by loving one another*. The Scriptures tell us that you can't truly love God and not love God's children, too. Out of genuine love for God, the God perfectly revealed in Jesus, love for the neighbor flows naturally and freely.

If love is real, that love will always find its expression in serving. Jesus comes to serve. And he teaches that we who follow him are to be servants also. But he doesn't just *tell* us how to serve. He *shows* us. Jesus wraps a towel around his waist. He assumes the humble posture of a servant. And offers an act of

hospitality, the act of a host. For he is the host of this meal. Jesus washes the dusty, dirty feet of his disciples.

He washes the feet of Judas. Even Judas! On this last night, at this last supper, Judas has been at table with all the others. Judas has been included in the number of Jesus' own who are in the world. Judas the betrayer is one of those Jesus has loved.

This is a love of unfathomable depths. The mystery of such a love makes it more difficult for you and me to comprehend the commandment Jesus gives us on this Maundy Thursday. Which gets its name from a word for *command*. On this night, we hear a new command: *Love one another as I have loved you*. This commandment is hard to grasp and harder still to obey. It's hard to learn to love as Jesus loves.

Because when he commands us to love one another as he has loved us, he's asking us to love those who are not easy to love. Jesus asks us to love those who are difficult to love. Jesus asks us to love those who seem impossible to love. How can we?

We can, because through him, all things are possible. Through this One who reminds us of God's perfect will for us: to love the neighbor as we love ourselves.

Jesus loves each neighbor. Neighbors are near and neighbors are far away. Neighbors are people who look like us, and neighbors are people who don't. Neighbors are people whose financial circumstances are different from our own. Neighbors are people who follow Jesus, and neighbors are people who don't.

Remember the gospel story of Jesus meeting a rich man and inviting the rich man to follow him? Even though the rich man chose his many possessions over Jesus, Jesus loved him. Jesus calls you and me to love people we don't understand. Jesus calls you and me to love people we don't agree with. Jesus calls you and me to love. Love is the mark of discipleship. It's what disciples do. Disciples love.

Loving is how a watching world can identify us as followers of this One who loves to the end. The word for *end*, in the gospel Greek, has another meaning. It means *completely*. To the utmost. *Jesus loves to the end. To the fullest extent.*

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. That's what he tells them—and us. His first friends, his first followers, didn't really get what he meant by that statement. Neither did they understand some other things he

said on the night he was betrayed. Not until after they'd watched him lay down his life on the cross did the meaning of his words become clear.

You and I are on the other side of that Friday. But we too stand at the cross. With eyes of faith, we too watch Jesus lay down his life. Giving meaning to his words that Paul passes on to believers at Corinth, and to us. *This is my body that is for you—that is broken for you. This cup—this filled cup—is the new covenant in my blood.*

Now the sun is sinking in the west, just as it was on that long-ago evening. Shadows lengthen. You've gathered here with friends and family. And yes, there is a meal involved. There is broken bread. There is a filled cup. As you draw near to one another, as you come together at the table of grace, may you know the closeness, the intimacy of feasting on—and feasting *with*—your host. The One who loves you to the end.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.