

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

April 9, 2009

Rev. Bob Garrard

Maundy Thursday, What a Night that Was

Exodus 12: 1-14, John 13:1-35

What a wild and woolly night that was nearly 2000 years ago. According to the Apostle John, it was the third Passover feast the disciples were to share with Jesus. Even though Jesus had been telling them he was going to die, very soon, it had not sunk in—except for one of them. I cannot blame the disciples for their state of denial. When someone you love tells you they are going to die soon, the full reality of it does not sink in until after they have died—maybe not until many years after they have passed on. So, at least 11 of the 12 disciples present probably expected the celebration of the Passover meal to go on as it had with Jesus the two years before. The death of Jesus was not likely on their minds that wild and woolly night.

What may have been on their minds at that meal is what we heard read from Exodus. The focus of the Passover meal would have been on supplying the sacrificial lamb, the shedding of its blood to cause the angel of death to pass over the people of God, the un-leaven bread that represented the hurried nature of the meal and the readiness to escape from slavery in Egypt that God had plotted out with Moses. The Passover meal was and still is a celebration of God's saving grace that sets his people free from slavery.

On that wild and woolly night around 30 AD, Jesus took this focus on the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the hurried supper, the release from slavery and God's saving grace and turned it into a new drama of salvation.

Jesus took on the hurried meal that reflected readiness to move on out when God gave the command and turned it into his "hour had come." The same immediacy of God's call to the Hebrews to make a mad dash for the borders of Egypt and freedom from slavery was now fully on the shoulders of Jesus. At any moment, he knew that he would be arrested, beaten and condemned to bleed to death on the cross—as the sacrificial lamb who would bring the people of God and the whole world freedom from slavery to sin and eternal death. "Jesus' hour marks the end of his ministry in 'this world' and his return to the Father." Yes, his "hour had come" and he was ready—so was one of the disciples eating with him, only in different way. [TNIBC Vol. IX](#) pg. 721

One of the aspects of that Passover night that made it wild was the unspoken but enormous tension over what was about to occur between Jesus and his disciples.

Fortunately, for those disciples and us, what filled the heart, mind and soul of Jesus amidst that terrible tension was not the normal human fear or anger, but God's love. It had to be the love of God that filled him for it was only the righteous power of God's love that could take on and overcome the power of evil, the darkness of Satan made incarnate in the disciple, Judas Iscariot. Even after three years of watching Jesus heal and feed the multitudes, change the lives of many for the good and hearing Jesus words about God's saving love, Judas was about to betray Jesus. He sat there and broke bread with Jesus like nothing was wrong. But Jesus knew who it was that had

turned traitor and would have him arrested so he would be put to death. Have you ever sat and had a meal with someone who hated your guts? How did that feel? The unspoken tension of those moments with Jesus and Judas in the same room and at the same table had to be enormous—almost overwhelming. But the love of God in Jesus was intimately in control, not human fear or anger.

We can see this love in that Jesus did not give into the possible temptations to escape or to send Judas to hell right then and there. Because Jesus fully trusted God and was the living presence of the fullness of God and God's love, Jesus took a redeeming approach to the tension filled situation. During the supper that became the Lord's Supper, as we know it, Jesus unexpectedly "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." The stoles we wear as pastors with our robes represent that towel. In washing the disciple's feet, Jesus became the host, and the humble servant in order to build an even deeper relationship with the ones he loved. He was putting his faith in action. He was teaching his disciples that to follow him and build a God-like loving relationship to others, one had to serve others, even to the point of washing their dirty smelly feet—yes, even the traitor Judas' feet. All of this may have been filled with uncomfortable tension, but it did not stop Jesus from being God's humble servant and demonstrating God's love to Judas and the other disciples.

As an example, "Anna, a parish visitor for her church, understood this lesson of being a loving humble servant of Christ very well. She was making her weekly visit to a church member in a nursing home. As she made her way down the hall, she heard the woman chanting, 'My feet hurt,' over and over again. She went into the room, took note of the woman's condition, and left. Going to the nurse's station, she asked if she might have a basin. She went back to the woman's room, drew some warm water in the basin, and knelt down in front of her. Slowly, so as not to frighten her, she removed her slippers and socks as she smiled and stroked her feet. Then she carefully placed one foot in the basin, washed and dried it. Following with the other foot, she completed the task. The woman watched her closely as she put her slippers and socks back on her feet. Anna rose and emptied the basin in the sink. She went to the woman, put her arm around her shoulders, kissed her forehead and said, 'I love you and God loves you and me.' Anna finished her rounds and as she left, an aide asked her, 'What in the world did you do for my patient? This is the first time she didn't complain that her feet hurt!' She answered the aide, 'All I did was wash her feet!' "Emphasis," March/April 2009

This is all Jesus did, he washed the feet of his disciples, however, the wildness of that night and its unending tensions only increased. Peter of all people, refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. He argued with Jesus and misunderstood what Jesus was doing. First of all Peter thought Jesus was demeaning himself by washing others feet, and then he flipped his thoughts to wonder if Jesus was trying to purify him. What Jesus was doing was showing his endless love for Peter and trying to build a deeper relationship with him. Have you ever lovingly planned an evening for your family or guests where you have prepared a very fine meal and some warm and wonderful entertainment for them? Have you then experienced a family member or guest

destroying the mood by their rebellious and ungrateful words or actions? If so, then you can identify with the wildness of that night around 30 AD and the increasing tensions caused by disciples who challenged every loving move made by Jesus. All he did was wash their feet!

After the foot washing, Jesus asked them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 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. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” In summary, Jesus was saying, “My friends I love you and want to have an everlasting relationship to you.”

Jesus then told them that someone was going to betray him. Maybe Peter felt guilty about challenging Jesus and asked who it was. Jesus simply took some bread, dipped it in a dish of sauce and fed it to Judas. He then gave Judas permission to go betray him for thirty pieces of silver and ironically, Judas obeyed him. Judas got up and left. Judas chose darkness over light, evil over good, Satan over God, and money over friendship. The Evil One possessed Judas and led him to start the events that led to the death of Jesus. It was indeed a night where the tension between God’s love, and human betrayal was very heavy in the air.

Finally, when all the commotion quieted down, Jesus had one more talk with his disciples. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“In the historical novel, *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*, Alan Paton told a story” about this love Jesus commanded the disciples and us to have for one another. It is a “true story of a white, South African judge named Jan Christian Oliver. A black pastor invited him to attend his church on Maundy Thursday. Given the reality of apartheid, the judge risked his career in going. Nevertheless, wanting to be a good man, he went. He learned upon his arrival that the service was to be one of foot washing. They urged his participation. He was summoned forward to wash the feet of a woman named Martha Fortuin, who as it happened had been a servant in his own house for over thirty years. Kneeling at her feet, he was touched by how weary and disfigured her feet had become from years of serving the needs of his household. Greatly moved, he held her feet with gentle hands and kissed them. Martha fell weeping, as did many others in the room. The newspapers got wind of the story and Oliver lost his judgeship. His political career was ruined, but he claimed the moment to have been the very one in which he found his own soul.” When Jesus commanded the disciples and us to love one another as he loved us, he was not talking about our just being pleasant with one another, he was teaching us about living out this self-giving and yet fulfilling love in the midst of the tensions of life where even the enemies of Jesus and his disciples must

proclaim about us, “see how they love another.” “Emphasis,” March/April 2009

Yes, on this wild and woolly night Jesus taught his disciples and us about the love of God and how it works when the tensions are high and the betrayal is nigh. Jesus not only mouthed the words, he did the work and paid the price to make them come alive.

Tonight, Jesus comes to us and invites us to dine with him, despite the fact we may have betrayed him with our sins, or have refused to allow him to serve us by washing our feet, so to speak, and build a closer relationship to him. Tonight in the midst of this tension, he gives his body and pours out his blood so that we too may know and be filled with the everlasting love of God. Come and let Jesus serve you at the table of the Lord, set you free from slavery to sin and fill you with his love.