

March 29, 2018  
Maundy Thursday  
Rev. Carolyn Albert Donovan  
Peace Lutheran - Austin, TX

I heard someone say something once that has been waiting to find its way into a sermon ever since...It was in 2013...and I think tonight is the night.

Because tonight is the night when Jesus knows it's time to say good-bye. And tonight is the night when Jesus is saying all the last things he wants to say. You know that list...the last things you want to say to the people you love? It's somewhere in your head, but you don't let yourself look at it too long because of everything else it means?

Jesus is going through that list. He says, "Love one another. Take care of one another. Be humble and not afraid to be vulnerable around one another. Wash each other's feet. Knock on each other's doors and let each other in...even when the Christmas tree is still up and it's March. When you realize you forgot to put on mascara and don't stop at CVS. Call a friend and ask if they can meet you for coffee when you don't know what to do but are afraid to admit it. Love each other. Love each other. Love each other. Love each other like I would love you if I was there to do it. Do what you think I would do...WWJD, ya' know?"

Jesus shares his last meal with his friends tonight. He knows it's important to break bread together. He knows that somehow...our walls come down a little bit when we share a meal...Meals are important. There is a reason that we are, at our core, a community who gathers for a meal.

I had a meal lately that was sacred like that. Hard. Honest. I had a conversation I didn't even intend to have. I didn't really want to have. I still feel churned up about it. I am not sure I was my best self in that conversation...but whatever else I was...I was really there. And so was the person across the table. And that...well...that was holy...in and of itself.

I imagine you've had holy meals, too...maybe not long ago...or maybe years ago...but you remember it better than everything that has faded into blurry edges around it. Those memories stand out in sharp relief...not always in happy ways...but in sacred ones.

If you are a movie person...one of my favorite movies about sacred meals is *Babette's Feast*. You have to be willing to read subtitles...but it is one of the most beautiful films about a holy meal I've ever seen. But, if subtitles don't sound super fun, and you'd rather spend seven minutes than a hundred and two...sometime in the next two days, google "Ruthy's Dinner" by Aaron Wolf.

His story is the one I heard in 2013...It is a beautiful story about the surprising sacredness of meals. As he tells the story about going out for Chinese with his dying grandmother, he makes a claim that is profound. He says, "There is a moment in every meal that's great...if you pay attention, it's there...where oblivion is replaced with infinity."

There is a moment in every meal where oblivion is replaced with infinity... where our mortality...our need for food to sustain our temporary earthly lives...gives way...and the everything that comes together to make our lives, and sustain our lives, and which our lives will in turn sustain even when they are over...everything...that ever was or will be...is right there.

Like the eternal meal of holy communion...it is so finite: a tiny bite to eat and sip to drink...yet it is the greatest feast that ever was or will be. Have you ever wondered if...maybe across the whole planet...there is always someone, somewhere having communion...? Even if it hasn't gone on for every moment across time...it is like a party that people are always joining and leaving. Probably the greatest quantity of food and drink ever consumed...

Newcomers join the table. Sometimes without much fanfare. And sometimes in great celebration. And folks leave the earthly feast, too....Also, sometimes without much fanfare. And the feast goes on. And on and on...it has been going on before we join it...and it will continue after we leave it...the infinite...reaching into time and space.

We don't always notice it. Sometimes infinity slips right by us, like a stranger under an umbrella...

But it's there.

This week, it is here. So close. We will slip between the edge of the abyss and expanse of the infinite more than once in the days ahead.

Today Jesus has gathered us, to assure us we are his own...forgiven...redeemed children...

And to offer us a way to embody humble loving service...

And to share a meal...where infinity and oblivion both press in close...

All this is just the preparation for what the next days will bring. They are for strength...and for understanding...even though he knows we won't be strong or wise enough to truly understand...

In a few moments, those who wish to are invited to come forward to both receive and offer the humble act of foot-washing...not because we are play-acting life in the ancient near east...but because...across the span of centuries, it is still a scandalously humble and vulnerable thing to do.

There are, of course, other ways to be scandalously humble and vulnerable... this ritual is just a small part of the work...And, much as the meal of communion transforms our lives to bear the kingdom of God in the world... hopefully, this, too, transforms our lives...so that we offer humble service in whatever ways God has given to each of us. As we come forward or reflect quietly during these moments, I pray that God settles into each of our hearts... to prepare us to both offer and receive scandalous and vulnerable loving care beyond these walls.

For those who participate in the rite of foot-washing, you may want to leave your shoes at your chair. You may come forward and sit, to first have your feet washed...and then to wash the feet of the person who comes forward after you. If you cannot offer foot-washing to whoever is after you, one of the ministers will be happy to step in...and if you want to offer the foot-washing without receiving it, again, a minister can step in, so you can participate in the rite however you are called and comfortable.

We wash each other's feet by pouring a small amount of water from the pitcher over the feet of the person seated in front of us and into the basin below. There is a stack of clean towels for drying, and used towels may be placed in the basket.