

The Love of God was Always our Firm Foundation

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Holy Thursday Reflection, April 2020

Hello—I'm Mary Ellen Mitchell, a parishioner here at the chapel for going on 8 years now, and also the director of Lydia's House, a catholic worker community about 6 blocks away that serves homeless families.

I'm honored to be your virtual preacher tonight, but I'll admit that the reflection I prepared for you originally entitled "The love of God and the Good Shepherd" was fully written back in February and when I went to review it last week I realized it lacked context for our world today, so I did a bit of a re-write in the last 5 days. My old message spoke of rooting our Christian identity in the love of God as represented in the biblical images of the Good Shepherd, seeking to feel the love of God in community with each other and in taking the Eucharist. And tonight, I'm disoriented because we're neither together nor will you be taking the Eucharist. We are going through the telecasts of Holy Week to honor that it's happening but for many of us, this much anticipated week is now a reminder of personal grieving and sadness, for all that we've lost and for all that we are losing right at this moment by watching this service on a screen.

Tonight we won't wash feet, we won't touch, but in our grief and loneliness and fear of the unknown we perhaps will come closer to Jesus' and his disciples experience of Holy Thursday than any small group seder or sterile cleansing of already clean feet could create for us, when we went through these motions in years past, back when we thought tomorrow was guaranteed and all would be well.

After a lot of thought and reflection on our collective life that's unfolded over the last weeks, my new title is "The love of God is now was always our firm foundation." Tonight I will speak to the limited things can know this Holy Thursday 2020 in Cincinnati Ohio, primarily that God loves us and that our lives are most solid when they are built on this love. In that sense, the main point of what I prepared in February, is still true. And I'd argue that truth, now, is more relevant than it was 6 weeks ago.

As we look to this gospel reading I'd like to highlight what comes just before the foot washing... the scripture reads "Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end."

The gospel of John tells us that Jesus knows his earthly time is almost up. And I think it's fair to gather that the disciples are also sensing that things are not going well, at least according to their version of Jesus as messiah. There is fear in this room as they gather for Passover, as they sense the real tide turning between the celebration that was Palm Sunday and the crucifixion that will happen tomorrow. They stand between an old way of being and a heavy unknown future; they are in limbo. The disciples are disoriented because things are changing so fast. And to top off the unknown, they are seemingly on the wrong side of the power equilibrium... Jesus has at his disposal a thorough knowledge of scripture and a fickle embrace by the masses; the synagogue rulers have the Roman Empire and legalized torture...so the fear in the disciples hearts is pretty intense.

Surprisingly, rather than fight for his earthly life or use the miraculous powers previously manifested to say, disappear, Jesus leans into his love for this motley crew and goes into the fear and suffering with them; rather than give them a pep talk or organize a strategy for staying alive, he washes their feet. He goes toward the pain and unknown and grabs a towel and a basin and calls these men back to the present, to the here and now, to an experience that they associate sensorially with being welcomed and being served and being human. Jesus reimagines the Passover washing of the hands by lowering himself to wash his followers feet; he humbles himself to both surprise and comfort them. He touches them intimately, he is with them fully. This is how Jesus loves; this is how Jesus prepares.

It's odd to highlight this moment because we can't engage in this practice right now—we can't be together, we can't touch. So what are we who are without companionship or physical interaction supposed to take from this? We, who are also filled with fear, as we're told that our own lives or the lives of the ones we love might end any day; as we await some kind of regional peak, supposed to do with this scene from a group of people so unlike us, from a time so long ago? Perhaps we take to heart the same message that Jesus intended for this rag tag bunch: we are God's own, and he loves us to the end.

I'll admit, this topic of God's love began stirring me pre-corona virus lockdown because I began to contemplate if the love of God was foundational to my own faith. Just as we began the Lenten season Father Eric gave the all church mass and reminded us of our status as "beloved sinners" with emphasis on beloved over sinner. I found myself wondering if belovedness was even a trait I associated with myself? Do I believe that I am loved by God and live my life accordingly? So many other parts of this Christian faith seem more tangible. The love of a God is so hard to get my head or heart around.

About the time of lent's beginning my children had become particularly enamored with the things of religion, spurred along greatly by their participation in the catechism of the good shepherd, a catholic Montessori religious education that is taught at their school. Watching them learn to love God and the Church made me wonder what they might know that I do not.

I began to want to know more about what they were learning and so I read the book "The Religious Potential of the Child." Written by Sofia Cavalletti, Maria Montessori's co-founder, it outlines many hours she spent observing Children as they learned about God. In this time she realized that almost all children were attracted to and resonated with the metaphor of the Good Shepherd from scripture. She writes this about teaching it to 3-6 years olds:

"The points on which we linger are the personal love and protective presence of the Good Shepherd. He calls each sheep by name. He knows each sheep intimately even if there are many. He calls each sheep and gradually they become accustomed to his voice. In this way a precious relationship is established. The sheep are safe and peaceful with their good shepherd.

Cavalletti continues by writing that, after many presentations of the Good Shepherd, "the parable is so deeply rooted in the child that it appears to be natural to him. The child does not know the parable in an academic way, but vitally. It is through the parable that the child's silent request finds response and gratification: the request to be loved and so to be able to love. An initiation to faith based on the Good Shepherd fulfills the fundamental need to be loved in a profound way. What else can be the foundation of religious life?"

Ultimately, I think for those of us who are no longer in pre-k, the foundation of our religious life and life overall might be many things other than the simple love of God. Having forgotten our basic needs for love and security we may have become caught up in the ritual, the minutia of

our theology, being right, judging others as wrong, good works, the obligation of showing up here every week... back when we could show up. Perhaps we forget what ever attracted us to all of this in the first place or what would attract someone new, should they venture to follow Jesus themselves.

I think it's always a temptation to hold onto that which is tangible and doubt the more spiritual or mystical elements of our faith. Asked why I'm a Christian I might say "because I appreciate the liturgy" or "I resonate with the social teaching" or "I've found community in Church." I doubt my first response would be "Because I'm beloved of God."

Particularly, in this time, the love of God may feel distant and especially obscure. Perhaps you're asking "How could a loving God allow this pandemic to be upon us?" Abandoning and doubting Jesus, turning away from the love they'd been offered, was a path some disciples would explore before Holy Thursday was over. One Christian friend said to me, of our present moment, "there is nothing theological to be discovered here. We just need testing and a vaccine." At least for me, however, I've been left bewildered by the knowledge and path forward that the world is offering. As the last 4 weeks unfolded I've looked to every source I can find to give me a concrete path to walk down as we attempt to run a family homeless shelter in a pandemic, where social distancing is impossible. I've talked to scientists, doctors, public health experts, people who run shelters in other cities, and I've read and read and read, sometimes at 3am, looking for guidance. And while we at Lydia's house are making concrete changes based on this crowd sourced wisdom, when we pose the question of harm reduction for homeless families to all of our advisors, the answer for a best solution is "maybe this, maybe that." And to the answer, "how long will this last," well, "No one knows." Science is racing to give answers and elected leaders can't seemingly provide a clear path right now. For many, when solutions come, it will be too late... I for one, have found more comfort in reflecting on God's love than any NYTimes article or doctor on the news.

I think another temptation that we always face when considering God's love is that of clinging fast to human love, of believing that each other is all we have and need. And in this season when we're told to stay away from each other, the need for other humans can be especially visceral. Of course, we do need human love. Tonight's reading is preceded by the mandate by Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you" and later in this gospel Jesus will say "by this

they will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Love of each other is our most compelling outward sign of inward grace. Though just after Jesus says how important this is and Peter swears that he’ll always love him, Peter denies him 3 times.

And thus, even as I believe that we must continue to try our best to love one another whether close or at a distance, and that of course we do need one another, we must remember that human love, the closest replication we can get to God’s love, is fleeting.

What then might we take from this disorienting scary time, when the worst may be waiting for us, perhaps even tomorrow and we don’t know when and if resurrection of the world we knew just a month ago will happen.

Perhaps we can take that the world is passing away... Jesus actually tells us that in John Chapter 2, many years before coronavirus came on the scene. But it’s still true. In addition to the tragedy of human life lost in this pandemic, there will be much that is lost in these coming months that needed to be lost, from excessive energy use to uncontrollable wealth accumulation to the belief that we are in control. Like the disciples with Jesus on Holy Thursday we fear what is to come, but we can’t honestly look back on the world that was with only longing. Everything was not ok.

Like the disciples we sense that a new way may be offered to us soon but it all seems oblique right now—perhaps the coming time of great trial will result in unexpected resurrection, in changes that will create a more beloved community—this moment seems to be crying out for change. But today, we sit in the unknown and mostly wait. Like the disciples of Holy Thursday what we have if we’re lucky, primarily, is food on the table, a place to wash ourselves and—most importantly-- the love of Jesus. The comforting, surprising, ever present love of a God we can’t see or touch.

The simple metaphor of the loving Good Shepherd that’s long captivated 3-6-year olds might better speak to us now than it would have in the pre Covid-19 world. This love, as a foundation for our lives, might suddenly make more sense. If so, this nightmare of a time can also be a gift. And maybe some of us, particularly our children, knew of this love all along and we just needed this time together to hear them out:

SO I’ll conclude with a brief moment of wisdom that was a bright light in my life lately:

At bedtime the other night my 7-year-old told me, “Mom, do you know that God loves me. That he would come after me no matter where I went. He always has his eye on me. The story of the Good Shepherd from the Bible isn’t actually a story about sheep; it’s a story about us.”