

April 21, 2011

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector

A lot of my reading these days is in the genre of children's literature. As I read today's gospel one of Madelynne's favorite bedtime stories came to mind: Guess How Much I Love You by Sam McBratney. It is the story of a conversation between Little Nutbrown Hare and his father. Little Nutbrown Hare goes through a series of declarations about the breadth of his love for Big Nutbrown Hare. But even when his feelings stretch as long as his arms, or as high as his hops, or even finally all the way up to the moon, Little Nutbrown Hare is fondly one-upped by the elder rabbit's more expansive love. Little Nutbrown Hare finally curls up and goes to sleep, secure in their love for one another, and as the little bunny sleeps, big Nutbrown Hare whispers I love you all the way to the Moon and back.

There is almost nothing greater than a parent's love for their child. For a parent, their child is this incredible being who is a part of them, whom they helped to create, whom they have nurtured and guided and deeply loved from the depths of their being. We use this parental imagery to describe God's relationship with us as a parent to a child, because even though we earthly parents, human parents don't always get it right, still this parental love is the best metaphor we have in our collective realm of experience. At its best, a parent's love is pure, unbreakable, ever-expansive, self-sacrificing. God's love for us is all of that... and more. God loves us so deeply, that God was willing to allow God's only son, Jesus, to journey all the way through betrayal, through being wrongly accused and to ultimately suffer death upon the cross. In our faith, we proclaim that God loved the world, God's beloved creation, so deeply, that God gave God's only son to take on our sins and conquer death, that we might have the promise of new life.

And so, on the night Jesus was betrayed – he gathered his friends together to share a meal. “Take, eat, this is my body.” “Drink this, all of you, this is my blood.” Jesus offers himself fully to his disciples. He offers to them and to us all that he has to give. His entire being body and soul he offers to us in love. In the Eucharistic prayer and in the meal that we share, we remember this deep, expansive love that God offers for each of us. And we remember Jesus' sacrifice and the promise of new life in his resurrection. In our communal celebration of that last meal, in the words that we pray together and in our embodiment of those prayers, our longing for God and for God's love is ritualized

and comes to the foreground. We enter into a dance in our relationship with God, a dance between inviting God's presence and recognizing God's absence from us.

"Do this for the remembrance of me." Jesus invites us back into community. Although he is no longer physically present with us, we gather together to remember. And in recalling the past we are connected with it. We bring the past - we bring Jesus' salvific acts - alive in the present. We celebrate anew in the present God's love for us. As we share the Eucharistic meal with one another, the meal that Jesus instituted on this night so long ago, we re-order ourselves and our lives back to God. We re-orient our hearts and minds with God's love at our core, from which all our actions flow.

In the Eucharistic meal, St. Augustine argues that there is a double eating going on. We are spiritually nourished by the body of Christ, and also as we partake of the body of Christ, we not only partake, but we become the body of Christ. Augustine cites 1 Corinthians, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread:' [1 Cor 10:16-17.]" and then goes on to argue " If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond 'Amen' ('yes, let it be so!') and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, 'the Body of Christ' and respond 'Amen.' Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true." [St. Augustine]

And so tonight and in the days to come, let us make our Amen true and be what we have received. Remember to honor the divine within, to be the body of Christ both in our words and actions. Tonight as we depart from God's table we are a people not merely thankful for God's love and forgiveness, but we are also a people empowered for mission. Our communion in the body of Christ leads us out into the world to be the body of Christ – our hands, our feet, our shoulders, our voices are the body of Christ for the world.

Joanna Adams, our guest preacher this week, reminded us of the words of 16th Century contemplative theologian, St. Teresa of Avila:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth,
yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good
and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.*

Tonight we will gather around this table, God's table to share the Eucharistic meal one final time before we strip the altar to begin the Triduum - the three days of marking the Passion and Christ's death and decent into hell. Tonight for one last time we will dwell in Christ's presence. Through our collective prayer the past will become the present and Christ is here with us through his gift of the Eucharistic meal. Tonight we are once again one with Christ, even as we prepare to mark his absence and remember his death. So, as we are spiritually nourished here tonight, remember that we are God's people.

And even while we grieve the death of Jesus, and mourn the loss of God incarnate among us, hold fast to the assurance of God's love for us. For although the God of love is no longer incarnate in the world, God's love continues through us -through our words and our actions, our bodies, our hands and our feet. Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And so, tonight even as we begin to turn our attention towards a changed world, a dark world, empty without God incarnate among us, take to heart St. Augustine's charge - go out into the world, out into your lives and be what you have received, be the body of Christ.