

MAUNDY THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2018

The Rev'd Canon Julia McCray-Goldsmith

I well remember that bleached out pink plastic cup, a survivor of more wash-tub ablutions than it was ever designed for, filled with a warm cloudy liquid. I could smell the cloying sweetness wafting upward from the rim, and I think I may also have seen a few spongy white spheres suspended in the fluid. The seeds of some local fruit, most likely. Or maybe better to call that drink what it actually was. A biological weapon masquerading as refreshment.

That was the first cupful of local *refresco* that I drank during the seven years my husband and I served as missionaries in Central America and the Caribbean. It wouldn't be my last. And although that drink precipitated many a trip to backyard privies as my body adjusted to the new microbial reality, it didn't kill me.

But I didn't know that then, as I steeled myself for the unappealing first sip. At the time, I suspected that I might well die from drinking it. To give you a bit more context, I was handed this drink while sitting in the muddy yard of friend whose domestic animals were roaming freely alongside her uncovered well. So I found myself identifying a bit with the Hebrew people: taking my refreshment with loins girded, sandals on my feet, staff in my hand and ready to make a run for it if need be.

This is a somewhat earthy image with which to launch a sermon, I confess, but Maundy Thursday is nothing if not an earthy entry into the holiest season of our church's liturgically-enacted memories. From the Christmastime celebration of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, this business of God with us—fully immersed in the messiness of the human condition—has been getting more and more real. And tonight we find ourselves worshipping amidst stories of lintels bloodied by lambs and Corinthians behaving badly at mealtimes and dirty feet. And a savior whose mandate to us is not to get our act together or clean up the house or lock the doors or secure the borders but... love one another. Just as I have loved you, he said.

There is something beautifully ordinary about the way we remember Jesus and his friends tonight, on this threshold of Good Friday disaster and Easter glory. If you were here last Sunday, or if you've been reading along in Mark's Gospel during the week, you'll know that there's been a lot of drama playing out in Jerusalem. Big noisy processions, prophetic interventions in the temple, competing claims to authority, deathly conspiracy being whispered in the halls of power. And all of this occurring during Passover, the annual remembrance of the liberation of the Jewish people, which would have brought maybe 200,000 additional people into town. It was a volatile situation, with a very real threat of violence hanging heavy in the air. Jesus had predicted it, but that didn't make it any less scary in the moment.

It would be entirely understandable if the companions who had followed Jesus right into the very eye of the storm had chosen this moment to flee or to arm themselves or, I don't know, hire additional school resource officers. But instead, they gathered to eat with him. In an upper room in that tinderbox of a city. Surrounded by ordinary mealtime elements like basins and towels and bread and wine.

I find it strikingly tender that—throughout the Biblical narrative—God always finds a way to feed the people when things get tough. In fact, our Bible regularly depicts God as the one hosting a meal at the very epicenter of the crisis. One commentary describes our first lesson—the one from Exodus—as a story about the threat of genocide with a recipe for roasted lamb inserted into the middle of the text.

And evidently God cares not only about the menu, but also about the table manners of the guests. Our second lesson, from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, contains the familiar words "This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

We're so used to hearing these words spoken as prayers on Sunday that it's easy to forget that they were actually written to the Corinthians as a scolding. To a church that was eating together in Jesus' memory, yes, but in ways that were classist and exclusionary.

Here's one takeaway. Danger may hang heavy in the air. It did then, and frankly, it does now. But—people of God—we're going to eat break bread together anyway. And we'll treat each other well while we do it. Every one of us who has ever suffered through a challenging holiday meal knows that it's not necessarily easy, but we can do this. We can love one another.

Just as I have loved you, he said. We can't all necessarily witness the resurrection, but we all can do what the resurrected one told us to do. That is, eat together, and wash and care for the humble parts of human bodies. And when we falter, we can come back and try again. This is the uncommon warmth and radical hospitality we are called to practice at Trinity, in both our worship and our service.

But what I find myself wondering tonight—on this night of greatest peril and promise—is whether can we allow ourselves to be loved as he would love us. Can we risk being touched, even to the soles of our feet, by another? Perhaps even by the other whose appearance and behavior unsettle us? By the other whose shameless love and vulnerability scares us? By the other who will be jailed and executed?

Will we be loved by the unlovable one, and thereby discover that nothing and no one is beyond the reach of God's love? Including the parts of ourselves that we'd rather not have Jesus touch with a ten-foot towel? Can we eat bread broken in memory of all that is breakable: broken relationships, broken dreams and broken promises? Can we take into ourselves the sacrament of the broken body of Jesus, which contains the broken hearts of all of us? Can we drink the cup even when it tastes of impending death?

Here's the thing about that unappetizing refreshment that I swallowed on that fateful afternoon in Nicaragua. It didn't kill me (although in the midst of the cholera epidemic it might well have) but what it certainly did was let me live. Because in that moment of reckoning, I realized that the only way to enter fully into the life of my new community was to drink from the same cup that they did. I had to let them love and serve me, or I would have no share with them.

People of God, your share with Jesus is manifest in your love for each other. But let us never forget that what empowers our love for the long haul is not good manners or good intentions, but rather the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Who will stop at nothing—nothing—to give it to us. Let the same mind be in us, then, that was in Christ Jesus. Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. May you drink deeply, dear friends of God, of the one who became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross—that you may truly live.