

Maundy Thursday
April 21, 2011
John 13:1-11

The Rev. Julie A. Kanarr
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend

In my family, stories are told about “the ancestors.” The point of these stories is clear: they are not mere anecdotes about the past, but stories that both describe – and shape—the character and deepest values of who we are.

One night at the dinner table during the Great Depression, my grandfather observed that every penny of their little Lutheran congregation's money was sitting in the family safe. The congregation had lost money when the local bank had failed, so their trust level of banks was low. At the time, my grandfather was the treasurer of the church, my grandmother the treasurer of the ladies aid, one of my uncles was treasurer of the youth group, and my other uncle was treasurer of the Sunday School. But as interesting as that all may be (or not) the message of that story isn't about depression era banks, the color of the safe and where it is now, or about when that dinner occurred, or about that congregation's depression-era fiduciary habits which no Lutheran synod or Episcopal diocese would condone today. That story – in its content and repetition, has a character shaping function. It describes and defines what it is to be part of the Brodahl family –setting the example for how we are to act: as trustworthy, faithful, dedicated stewards of what has been entrusted to us. Although many details have faded into the fog of the past, the story's center is always the same. It is a story about our collective past that both reveals and shapes my family's character for today—and into the future.

In these holy days, as we gather to hear the scripture's stories of Jesus dining with his disciples, washing their feet, and being betrayed, denied, put on trial, crucified, and rising from the grave, we gather not just to “recall” them, or even to “re-enact them” like one might see at the site of some historic battlefield or other shrine, with actors dressing the parts and following the script, but to *celebrate* them by entering into their drama – by letting them become liturgy –the work of the people– that they may become truly OUR story-- deeply part of us, and shape who we are – both now and into the future.

For generations the church has gathered to celebrate these stories—to tell them in the context of this most holy meal as we celebrate our Lord's death and resurrection, so that in re-remembering these stories, we might be remembered into them, and into the new life that is ours in Christ. Through these stories, we enter into the mystery that Jesus who died on the cross is alive and present for us, as the crucified and risen Christ, as the bread of life who gave himself for the life of the world. These stories are told through the lens of hindsight, to and for the church who already know the ending. So we don't need to pretend to be surprised at how they end. And these stories are theological –they are stories of meaning and depth, told again and anew in order to shape us in our life of faith, to guide the Christian community into a deeper understanding of who we are, and of who God is for us. It is these holy stories that define and shape us as a community of God's beloved, servant people.

In John's gospel, Jesus' last meal with his disciples is marked by footwashing—and the commandment to love one another. John's “do this” is about loving one another as Christ has

loved us, which sounds easy enough, at least until we start thinking more in depth about who Jesus is talking about and what that love entails. The command is to love one another as JESUS loves us. In telling the story of the foot washing, John's gospel makes it clear that Jesus washed the feet of all the disciples – including Peter who was about to deny him, and Judas who was about to betray him...and the gospel emphasizes that Jesus did so not out of naiveté or ignorance, but with full understanding that he was expressing love for all—even them, even knowing full well what they were about to do.

This love is about an abundance of divine mercy, a generosity of love that pours out from God and overflows into human life. This is about participating in God's love –poured out for us in Christ, a love that is for this whole world that God so deeply loves. God's love is radical and generous, expressed in its fullness by Jesus laying down his life for his friends.

And Jesus, having loved them—all of them-- loved them to the end. The Greek word is “*telos*” – which is not about time, as in “when will this sermon ever end?”, but about completion. Jesus loves us to the end—fully, completely, until God's purpose, and love for us finds its wholeness and completion. John's gospel invites us to play “connect the dots:” from the Word that became flesh and dwells among us, and whose glory we have beheld, as of a Father's only son, to God who so loved the world so as to give God's only son, from Jesus, the bread of heaven who gives himself for the life of the world, to taking the role of a servant, to wash the feet of his disciples, commanding them to love one another as he has loved us, to teaching us that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends, whose final word on the cross is “it is finished” –complete— a form of that same Greek word “*telos*.” Jesus, loves us-- all of us--to the end – to completion – a completion which centers in the cross, a completion that is renewed in our sharing of Christ's body, and that echoes in his command and invitation to love one another. This love is renewed as the risen Christ comes to his disciples gathered behind locked doors with the gift of peace, breathes into them a spirit of forgiveness, and empowers them to go out into the world to share God's love and proclaim the good news. This is the love that forms our present and shapes our future.

Let us enter deeply –and fully into the story of the passion of our Lord, lean into its mystery, and be shaped and formed, re-newed, re-connected, and re-remembered in Christ's love, until it finds its end, its completion, its wholeness, in us.