

Exodus 12: 1-4, (5-10), 11-14
1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26
John 13: 1- 17, 31b – 35
Maundy Thursday, Yr. C

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
Bainbridge Island, Washington
March 24, 2016

“Jerusalem the Golden”

Jerusalem sits on top of a large hill about half-way from the coastal plain to the west and the deserts to the east. It is placed in a location of safety. The valleys below it are remarkably narrow and winding. While the fertile soil is at the bottom of these valleys that surround Jerusalem, there is no safety there. Enemies would be upon you before you knew it. So, centuries ago, people moved their homes to the tops of the hills of Judea – for safety. The city is built almost entirely with a local stone that truly is golden in color. Today, the law is that all buildings must be clad in Jerusalem stone. In the bright sun, it is almost blinding and in the morning and evening, the city glows with an ethereal light. In the time of Jesus, the Temple was the dominant structure in Jerusalem, topped by the Holy of Holies. Coming down from Galilee, Jesus and his friends would have approached the city from the east, coming down from the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, and then up the steep stone walkway to the eastern gates of the city. Because Jesus and his friends were Galilean Jews, they were not required to spend the evening inside the city gates but were permitted to stay outside the city. They would have camped out on the Mount of Olives – it was cheap housing and not too far a walk from the Temple. And the Temple would have loomed over them, filling the western sky with its ramparts and glorious structures. They would have heard the ceremonies, the continuous sacrifices of many animals by the priests, the comings and goings of faithful people, the sounds of many languages, the endless blend of the profane and the holy. But in those last days, Jesus elected to stay in the city itself. Perhaps it was safer, perhaps the room was offered by a faithful follower; perhaps it was to make it easier for Jesus to come and go. Climbing up and down from the Kidron Valley is quite a workout. It must have been amazing – to be in that golden city, to try to absorb its complicated and mixed message of deep holiness and relentless commerce. Jesus has a challenged reaction to Jerusalem the golden – admiration mixed with disgust blended with despair and great hope. Many of us feel that way about religion today.

Jesus and his friends are celebrating Passover in the big city. The first clear sign that this was no ordinary Passover feast was the shocking action by Jesus to abandon his role as the host and take up the role of the lowest worker at the feast. The person, usually a slave or indentured servant, who performed the ritual of foot-washing, was engaging in an act so lowly as to make that person ritually impure. Washing the feet of others was an act that was necessary for good manners and proper piety but its cost was high for the person who did the washing. It was shocking to see Jesus do this, particularly on this night before Passover – a time when Jews relished the story of their coming freedom from slavery and the triumph of the God of Israel over the gods of Egypt. Peter stands in for the rest of the disciples when he objects but Jesus, as always, over-rules Peter and proceeds. When he is done, Jesus returns to his role as host of the banquet and preaches a small homily about what he has done.

Now, we might think that the message is quite clear for us all. People in positions of leadership should, at least once, pretend to be lowly and meek and engage in a photo opportunity to appear

as if they care about the poor and pretend to look like they understand what it means to be at the bottom of the heap. So, one shows up at a food pantry, hands out food for 15 minutes or so with plenty of photographs taken, and then departs for another gathering. Or, one hands out coins once a year as a sign of charity and love for one's subjects.

Doing this sort of faux-charity is not what Jesus is showing us. This is an outward sign of an inward grace – this is a sacramental act performed by Jesus as were his healings and other ministerial signs performed throughout his earthly ministry. The privilege of leadership, the position of authority is given properly and fairly only to those who understand deeply what it means to be led, to be governed. God's plan for all creation calls for leadership but it also calls for followership with both united through fellowship.

Doing hard difficult unappreciated work is part of being human. All work when done to help build up God's kingdom is blessed work; all work done for selfish reasons is sinful and debilitating to those who fall into that trap. To do the unpleasant work of the world and to do it with all of our skill and attention is sacramental action. By taking the unglamorous work seriously, by imbuing it with all of our abilities and all of our effort, we make it holy work, pleasing to God and helpful to others. And Jesus did this throughout his ministry. That is why he ate with sinners, why he touched lepers, why he spoke with strangers. This is why he taught the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. In both parables, there is the shocking reversal of the normative. The hated outsider shows the only compassion and love and the father debases himself in joy and relief at the return of the one thought dead. Jesus lived every hour of his ministry in a manner that is consonant with his actions at the Last Supper.

And in doing these shocking things, in stepping outside the bounds of conventional thought and action, these exemplars actually lift up the deeper value, the core truth, of what it means to love, what it means to glorify God, what it means to be fully human, living in harmony with God's plan for all creation. By taking the least part, Jesus shows us what the greater part really means. By lifting up the lesser part, Jesus reveals that the true joy of leadership, the real purpose of power is to ensure that all of creation is honored, nurtured, and loved. This is no photo op; this is no staged event for public relations purposes. These are the actions of someone who truly loves his friends, sees no problem in serving them, relishes in the opportunity to gift them with an act of love and respect, and knows that he is giving them a wonderful example of living leadership – an inescapable demonstration of what Servant Leadership really looks like.

And so Jesus follows this demonstration with the clear commandment to love one another as I have loved you. We are meant to know that the way to show love, the love shown by Jesus to all he met in his earthly ministry, is to engage in acts of caring, nurturance, and love without regard to whether they are lowly acts of cleansing and feeding, or high acts of leading and ruling. All work done to build up the kingdom is godly work.

Do as I have done. Jesus holds the disciples' focus as Christ Jesus holds our focus on the centrality of God's eternal and perfect love only hours before all that Jesus has accomplished will seemingly come crashing to ruin. But nothing can alter or destroy God's love. It will triumph in the end. So, even if we believe our own world is failing miserably, if we fear that all

we care about is crumbling into dust, Jesus calls us to do as he did – to love as he loved us – to love one another in simple acts of lowly service and in high-minded acts of noble leadership.

As the night grew darker, the words of Jesus lingered as the fragrance of a flower – “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Amen.