

Pastor's Message – Maundy Thursday (2023)  
@ Union-Congregational Church

These last three years we have learned a lot about pandemic and have learned a lot about preventative measures against disease, sickness, and death. We have been reminded about the importance and value of hand-washing to keep germs away. We have learned about social-distancing and mask-wearing and vaccinations as ways of protecting ourselves and others.

We are not out of the woods yet. The Waupun United Methodist Church has suffered several cases of Covid in recent weeks and many have resigned themselves to a suspicion that Covid is here to stay and will be an ongoing health hazard of our lives.

Quarantining was hard for many. We are social animals and need connection with others. But sometimes we don't do social connection well and need God and the relationship and love that exists between the Father, Son, and Spirit to show us how relationships should be done: interactions with love.

On the night before he died, Jesus gathered with his disciples to eat the Passover meal together and gave them a new commandment: a *mandatum novum*, from which we get the name of this worship service – Maundy Thursday. This new commandment is at the heart of the meaning of Maundy Thursday. Jesus was all about gracing us with love and showing us the love of God toward God's people. And in all the serving humility that comes with such love, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, and encouraged them to be servants of that humble love for the world.

Of all the gospel writers, John especially shares this important message of God's gracious love. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Our world, in spite of our need for connection is not very good at loving each other. It seems that we are increasingly polarized and working together is not something that we do well.

However, these two churches, Union-Congregational and the Waupun United Methodist Church have had, as I understand, a long connection, going all the way back to 1968, when they actually considered a merger. It is good for us to stand against the climate of separation and the challenges of social distancing brought upon us by pandemic as we come together to worship together both tonight, Maundy Thursday, and tomorrow, Good Friday. It is a statement that we can overcome differences and worship one God.

Although John is the gospel writer who speaks more about love than any of the other three, John was not always so sensitive to the importance of love.

John and his brother, James, were fishermen with their father, Zebedee. They would be among the first to be called as Jesus' disciples. But Jesus gave them another name—"Sons of Thunder." It is a commentary on their strong and stormy temperament. They often spoke and acted out that character of zeal and self-righteousness. On one occasion, they zealously put themselves ahead of the other followers of Jesus as they approached their Lord with a firm request.

We heard it tonight as they asked Jesus, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.... "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." You can imagine that did not sit well with the other disciples – such provocative and selfish words. Polarization even then and among Jesus' disciples.

It gave Jesus a teaching occasion about the path he must go. "You do not know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" But they still maintained their audacity.

"We are able," they answered.

Jesus did not dispute their boldness. Indeed, it would be a useful trait in their faith in years to come. But neither did he dismiss the path to the cross—not only for himself but also for them as they would learn to carry their own crosses. So Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." The other disciples were aggravated with James and John, but for all the wrong reasons. They thought that these two had beaten them to the punch in the pursuit of greatness. They all had yet to learn that true greatness comes in the service of love. It would take the maturation of their faith to understand where Jesus was leading them and to grasp the joy of the grace that comes in loving. "Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another." John was loved by his Lord, even when he was himself clueless about that love.

But John was also loveless, harsh, and quick to judgment, even excluding others as if they did not belong to the company of Jesus. This behavior would rear its ugly head on one occasion.

"Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us."

Again, he had to be corrected. Jesus said to John, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Yet no sooner had Jesus said these things than another storm cloud from John would burst. While Jesus had set his path to go toward Jerusalem and to the cross, they would pass through a village of Samaritans. These Samaritans, however, did not welcome Jesus in their midst. John would join his brother James in condemning these Samaritans to the wrath of God.

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Jesus would rebuke them. He would teach them again about how his whole mission has been about extending the grace of love to all, even to those who are enemies. The ugliness of anger, hate, and violence has haunted us in all our lives and has become far too common in our own time. Its only remedy is the path of love that Jesus followed. Only through the cross and the resurrection does it become clear that love has no bounds and should never be restricted from bringing its healing grace.

And so, on this night where Jesus' betrayal is at hand, he extends love to his disciples. He washes their feet. He shares in a meal. And he promises them that, even when the dark storm clouds of judgment and persecution descend upon them, love is what wins. The grace of his love is stronger than all of these. “Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another.”

We do not know for sure whether John is also the beloved disciple. But what we do know is that John came to a greater faith in Jesus' love and its gracious power for all. So, in the Gospel of John, only the beloved disciple together with women who followed Jesus would be at the foot of the cross. All the other disciples had fled in the fear and foreboding of this time. And while on the cross, Jesus would turn to his own mother and say, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the beloved disciple, “Here is your mother.” Jesus did not mean to call attention to himself on the cross in this moment, but his cross was the means by which the new community of love is created. Grace brings people together. Even as Jesus' mother Mary was deprived of her son in death, the beloved disciple and she are now joined together as family.

This gracious love would bring the early church together, and would continue to empower the Church to be its faithful witness. Unfortunately, we all know that within the Church there can be loveless words and acts. This is especially evident when we choose not to be forgiving, even though our Lord forgave us all our sins. Indeed, we need to confess our sin when we do not love our brothers and sisters as we ought but choose to be hardened in our lovelessness.

The Church is to be that family of love, bringing that grace of love that

knows no bounds. And somewhere along the line in all of this, it finally sunk into John, beyond all the stubbornness and hard-heartedness that plagued his life, that this crucified love is the message of the gospel. Grace transformed the heart of John—the grace of Christ's love for him, even unto death. And the new commandment of Jesus would so grace John that it would extend through him to others.

This year, 2023, is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a favorite hymn, Amazing Grace, and it has led me to consider one of the most important underpinnings of Methodism and Wesleyan theology: the idea of God's grace toward us. John Wesley taught that God reaches out to us with prevenient grace, love and call and invitation before we may even be aware of it. God offers justifying grace: forgiveness of sin by Jesus in his death on the cross and sanctifying grace by the Holy Spirit, inviting us into closer relationship with God. I expect we'll hear more about that tomorrow in pastor Jacob's sermon and more as we sing our Closing Hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee."

We see an example of love between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and, throughout the Bible, we see a thread of God's. It is also a commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another. Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Forgiveness is a grace of Jesus' love. And it is meant to flow from us, as Jesus encouraged us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Even when we are loveless and isolated in our lovelessness, Jesus seeks to bring us to the grace of his love. And Jesus is willing to go all the way through the cross and death for our sake so that we may be loved beyond all things.

Our hope for the future is built on Jesus' blood and righteousness and the love of God that we experience in and through him. Forgiveness and salvation is God's promise to us, a new covenant that promises good and not ruin. Those are the thoughts God has for us; for we are always on God's mind: to bring to us a future and a hope. God's desires are for peace among us; for our good – the plans God has for us.

That is the Amazing Grace! God offers. Grace filled with peace and love. God's Amazing Grace! calls us into unity: to live together and work together and worship together. And it is in the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup that we receive the greatest realization of God's Amazing Grace!