

Love Poured Out
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“Now before the Passover...”

John tells us that unlike the other Gospel stories, Jesus’ meal with the disciples is not a Passover Seder. For John, Jesus does not share the Passover meal with the disciples, but rather he is the sacrifice. The evening shadows fall, and John tells us he understood that his time had come. It’s a signal to the readers to pay attention to these details, to let the images sink deep into their memories. As far as we know, the earliest church struggled to understand the events of Jesus’ life, and in particular his departure.

They remembered the crucifixion, and proclaimed the empty tomb. As Fred Craddock says, these were triumphant details of Jesus’ vindication. But, Craddock adds, the announcement of “He is risen” was often preceded by a less faithful cry: “He is not here.”

They yearned to understand: what do we do when we are a part from him?

Jesus’ absence proved to be a struggle, and perhaps it continues to be a struggle for us today – we who are trying hard to understand this world of social distancing and quarantine. It is a struggle to understand why we cannot be with our loved ones, our friends. We’re tired of being in our houses alone, or trying to set up home offices, or scavenging for toilet paper.

John’s gospel helps us understand that the disciples did not question the resurrection so much as they struggled to understand what it meant to be Christ’s followers. Things had changed, he wasn’t here with them, coaching them, leading them. What were they to do now?

So John tells us to pay attention to these details: to see this night as an agape meal, a meal of shared love, and service, a model for how we are to act toward each other.

It begins, then, with Jesus knowing his time had come.

Jesus pushes back from the table, and slips away from the fellowship. He grabs a basin and a pitcher, sets aside his robe, and takes the towel the servants use and begins to wash the feet of the disciples. As he dries them with the apron, their eyes widen in amazement.

Peter will not stand for this. He can’t imagine his Lord and teacher stooping down to wash the grime and street dirt off his feet. It is a lowly, disgusting job. This is not some sort of expensive pedicure or spa treatment, but an essential service of hygiene.

We’ve been paying a lot of attention to essential services lately. Every night in New York City, precisely at 7 p.m. cheers ring out from patios and apartment towers. There are chants, and whistles and applause. It’s a new urban ritual, says the Washington Post, which coincides with shift changes, and it is taking place across the country as people recognize the work of doctors, nurses, EMTs, grocery store employees. Theater critic Peter Marks observed,

I dashed out of our apartment Sunday night just before 7 to buy groceries, and as I made my way down Pearl Street to the market, this surround-sound expression of support and gratitude engulfed me. The Financial District in Lower Manhattan is not the most densely populated part of town, and yet the usually

silent dusk of early spring in the streets around the Stock Exchange was alive with noise. I couldn't tell exactly where the cacophony was coming from: It seemed as if it was everywhere at once. There's a major hospital — New York-Presbyterian Lower Manhattan — on William Street, a few blocks from where I was standing. So perhaps the applause was ecstatic neighborhood reverb, off low-rise storefronts and the offices of the New York Fed and the skyscrapers that were turned into apartments after the financial crisis of 2008.

The moment blew through me like a warm wind. "I hear America singing," the Brooklyn poet Walt Whitman once wrote. On this night, I heard New York cheering.

It is, says Marks, the city's way of saying, "We are here! We are here!"

A reminder of how grateful we are for those who symbolically wipe our feet in acts of essential service.

Yet in other places in the world there are no cheers for essential workers. In some places the presence of doctors, nurses and hospital workers has created suspicion that they are bringing the virus home to their neighborhoods each night. In these places, workers have been abused, and threatened, even injured.

In those places the cries are not "Thank you," but "How dare you," and are also reminders that essential work is also thankless, dangerous work.

Peter is confused by Jesus' act of essential service. He hesitates. He doesn't want Jesus to wipe his feet. He's embarrassed, or scared – perhaps the same sort of fear we have that those who are doing essential work might bring infection to us.

But Jesus persists, reminding Peter that the work of washing feet is an act of love. Not only that, Jesus says, it is an act that we should do for each other. As Jesus' love is poured out in that water and poured out on the cross, so too should our lives be poured out for one another.

That is our Essential Service.

In a time when we are separated from each other, I believe it is essential that we remember two things, at the very least. One is, like Peter, we are doing the best we can. Our efforts to love each other will not always be perfect. Sometimes we will fall short, sometimes anxiety and fear will get the best of us, just as they got the best of Peter.

But any effort, offered in love, is sufficient.

The second thing that is critical for us to remember on this Holy Evening is that as Christians and as a church, we have a responsibility to be poured out in love for each other. Our mission continues – even if we cannot be together. Our love is carried forward in actions like writing notes and making phone calls, at learning how to navigate technology, or simply bowing our heads in prayer.

Tonight, love is poured out for you. It is a gift that reminds us we are loved by God, and called to love each other. Sometimes we will fall short, but whatever we attempt in love will be sufficient. Amen.