



“Betrayal”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

April 8, 2009

Our text this Wednesday of Holy Week is from John 13:1-35. It is a longer passage, but as this week is about retelling the story of Jesus' final days, I think that it is worth hearing in its entirety. It is the narrative of the drama around the last supper. "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel as tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me teacher and Lord- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who send them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'" After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples- the one whom Jesus loved- was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night." When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer; you will look for me and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love on 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."

I was at the Mint museum out on Randolph Rd. a few weeks ago and among their pieces is this terrific work painted in 1635 by Italian artist Giovanni Martinelli called 'Death comes to the Table.' It is the snapshot of a dinner party gone horribly wrong. It shows five people- men and women seated around a table filled with food and goblets of wine. And over the shoulder of one of them swooping out of the shadows beyond the table is a skeleton holding a lantern in his bony hand presumably to light his way to and from some sort of dark underworld. The skeleton has an

almost elated grin on its face as it taps the shoulder of one of the young men at the table. It's time! The young man, as you may have guessed, has blanched with shock. He holds his hand to his chest- a gesture- me? and gazes up at the crackling smile of the skeleton with eyes wide with an unmistakable expression- 'I'm not ready'. The other dinner guests are practically falling over one another to move as far away from that end of the table as possible- one has jumped up, arms flailing, the other with a look of slight denial, another with an expression that is more incensed than anything- how dare you disrupt our evening. Another, fixated by the woman next to him, amazingly fails to see what is happening at all.

In the gospel of John the disciples receive the news of Jesus' betrayal pretty casually. A nod in the direction of the beloved one suggests that he should inquire whom Jesus was referring to. In the other gospels, they don't take it quite so well.

In essence, Jesus has just dropped a bomb in the room and the impact is not unlike what Martinelli depicts. Who is it? Is it I, Lord? They all ask him. No, surely not me! They seem to feel as hurt and betrayed by Jesus' suggestion that betrayal was possible as Jesus felt betrayed by one of them. But the betrayal would take place, in fact, at that very moment. Jesus tells Judas to go and do what he has to do and off Judas goes into the night. Death has already come to this dinner table- the hour has arrived.

But in John there is no great uproar as in the other gospels. Just a quick and quiet exit by Judas, with everyone left assuming he had simply been sent on an errand. Which was, in a sense, true.

When we hear or think of this story, we tend to have only one understanding of betrayal in mind- the one prompted by a few pieces of silver offered to Judas by the authorities- and the devil in his heart, of course. But when we back the story up to the beginning of the scene- before it says that Jesus was troubled in Spirit, we get a more complete picture of the betrayal that perhaps troubled him.

The rest of the story of the betrayal begins with a preface by John- 'having loved his own...he loved them to the end'. And that much is certainly clear. In a shocking act during supper, after John affirms that everything about this night and what was to come was fully in Jesus' hands, he got up.

Took off his cloaks and laid them down- the same verb used when the gospel writer would say, he 'laid his body' down on the cross. He wrapped a towel around his waist, and then one by one, washed the feet of his friends.

If you could paint a picture of this scene it would have been filled with uncomfortable expressions and awkward postures. This was all out of order- feet- grimy, walking around in sandals on a dirt road all day, feet were typically washed by the guest himself as it was somewhat of a personal hygiene issue before a meal- more of a private matter, or perhaps it would have been done by a servant as a gesture of the masters sweeping hospitality. But never a host. And certainly not during the main course- no, not like this. This is not how it was done.

In a way, this caused the disciples to feel betrayed by him, "You will never wash my feet," Peter says, missing the point. And then goes on to miss the point again. This has nothing to do with being clean, Jesus tells him. It has to do with being with me. "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me," he says.

Jesus was doing that which he was sent to do- to share the love of his Father with the world. But what good is a gift if there is no one to receive it? The receiving is what is required to have a 'share' in Christ he says. To truly be with him and thus with God.

And the nature of the foot washing points to the nature of God's love that they are being invited to receive. It is intimate. Mutually vulnerable, Very personal. A little uncomfortable, if we're being honest because so close is this relationship, in fact, that the two involved become one- the Word of God can divide bone from marrow Paul says, so deeply integrated into every fiber of our being is the closeness of God to us in Christ.

It pours itself out with no expectation for love in return. The foot washing removes any possibility of distance between Jesus and the disciples and any distance between them God who wants nothing more than to welcome them, in an act of sweeping hospitality, to his home.

And this act of footwashing becomes a symbol of the way Christ shares the incredible love and communion and closeness that he himself enjoys with God with the disciples.

This is the kind of generous hospitality that changes you. But to deny the gift of love is to keep God at arm's length. which I suspect has something to do with Jesus' troubled spirit. One that was among the closest to him simply would not receive.

Jesus had offered him God's hospitality- but knew that Judas did not-could not- Open himself up to being changed by that love.

Jesus knew he would be handed over to die. But I wonder if his heart was troubled also because this child of God whom he loved still could not receive love in return because of the capacity for chaos in a broken heart. Thus, the betrayal.

The gift he had to offer was turned away at the door. 'Go do what you have to do.' Jesus said to Judas who was, we would later see, himself also tormented by the impossible distance between them.

We speak about betrayal as though it is a crime we would never commit. Peter said the same thing to Jesus. Right before he betrayed him in denying him publicly. Peter himself still unprepared to love Jesus as he had been loved- unconditionally, publicly, unequivocally, sacrificially.

And yet Christ still moves on to do what he has to do then and now. By gathering up his people, taking up his towel, and laying down his life. By tenderly cleaning off the mire of our sin so that we can know that we will stand washed clean and renewed before God at the end of our days so we don't have to be haunted by the fear of the disruption of death at our dinner table now.

And he asks only that we receive in return. Standing here half naked, exposed to insult or acceptance, open to our rejection or love, is Christ inviting us to be ministered unto so that we may minister.

Inviting us to be changed by the love that he was sent to share so that we can be so shaped by this gift that we start to resemble that which was given- so that we will also lay down our pride

and our self-sufficiency, and take up our towels to live for love, risk being guided by love, commit to remaining in love, and be moved to share love without precondition or expectation for return. And all for the sake of love.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Amen.