

The Love Question

April 24, 2016 John 13:1-35

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Today's gospel story might feel like a bit of time warp travel. Up to now, this Easter season, we have been listening to and reflecting upon Jesus' resurrection appearances. We have stood with the disbelieving disciples, trying to understand what resurrection looks like (ask Thomas) and what it means (ask Peter). We ate Swedish fish on the beach with the risen Christ, we gingerly touched the nail holes in his hands to help us wrap our brains around what has happened since Good Friday.

And now today, here we are back at the fateful night that set all of these events, horrific and glorious, into action. Today we are back at the Last Supper. Today we have heard again the story we usually associate with Maundy Thursday. The meal, the foot washing, the betrayal. The new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you. The context of this command is very important. Jesus is talking to his closest friends. This is not the sermon on the mount, it is not the big preaching from the shore to multitudes of followers. No, this is a close and intimate dinner party. A gathering of truly the inner circle. Those who have followed him the longest, those who know him the best. And in the midst of this intimate dinner party, betrayal lurks. Jesus himself brings it up several times in the beginning of our story. And then eventually the story revolves completely around the suspense of the betrayal and the question of who.

But even the betrayer is included in the foot washing. Even the betrayer is welcomed at the table. Even in the midst of the doom and gloom of this night, Jesus chooses to love all, to include all. That's a hard number to follow. Most of us have experience betrayal or hurt of some kind from someone close to us. It is stabbing and deep; it takes your breath away, it sends your mind into a whirlwind of confusion and doubt. Could we invite our betrayer to dine with us? Worse, would we, could we, offer to wash their dirty stinky feet? Could we choose love as Jesus has here? I think that's the goal Jesus asks us to reach for. I think he knows we won't always be able to choose love. But we are always assured grace even in those places where we cannot meet the goal.

But what would happen if we tried to choose love on a more regular basis? What if every response we had, every reaction we had, came from a place of at least trying to choose love? Each day we are presented with opportunities to choose love....or....what is the or? I think the 'or' is to choose ourselves. Do we choose love, meaning our focus is on the other person. Or do we choose ourselves, meaning the focus is on me?

By now many of you have heard that our recent vacation was anything but. Within 24 hours of arriving, a vicious stomach flu hit us like a plague from the middle ages. We fell quickly and we fell hard, babies and adults alike. The stomach flu is not the illness you want to have while confined with too many family members in too small a space! I don't need to dray you any pictures. The point is, we were all wiped out, disappointed, tired, ill, and a tad cranky. It was a LOT of togetherness.

Why am I telling you this? Well, the last full day of our trip, most folks were pretty much back to health and we had decided to finally hit the hotel pool. Scott and I were the last to head down, but we ran smack dab into one of our kids leaving the pool already. They were visibly upset, and where looking for one of us to take a walk with them. So I set off around the grounds with our

shaken child. Turns out there had been a difference of opinion of parenting styles between two of our young families. Imagine that! And this difference of opinion escalated into a bit of a confrontation. And this left our young parent very disturbed by what felt like an attack from the other family.

After listening a bit, and affirming her feelings, I asked what she wanted to do. And she said to me “well, I don’t know. I keep thinking about how sick everyone has been. And how tired that has left everyone. And how disappointed everyone is about not getting to go to the parks. And how cooped up everyone has been. And I guess while I don’t like what has happened, I just think no one is at their best right now.” And I was SO proud of her! She was choosing love in a very difficult situation. She was choosing to focus on this other family and their situation, and believe and trust that in better days, they would not behave this way.

As well, she was willing to sacrifice her desire to stand up for her own family by recognizing the reality of the situation. We both agreed that if this was the first day of the trip, well then better boundaries would need to be discussed. But on this the last day, she decided to choose to love by accepting the situation as it was. After a few more spins around the hotel, she rejoined all of us where we all sat together in the pool enjoying the last crumbs of a sort of crummy vacation.

And I think that is what Jesus is asking of us. Where will we choose love? Where will we focus on the other rather than ourselves? Where do we have the chance to put the good of the whole above our individual wants and desires? This challenge plays out in churches in so many ways. Over time, we all come to love certain aspects of our church life; whether that is worship elements, or fellowship events, or mission opportunities. The thing is though, most of us love DIFFERENT aspects of church life. Some of us love communion in the pews, some of us not so much. Some of us adore the old traditional hymns, some of us not so much. Some of us want to work at the warming center every single Saturday, some of us not so much. Some of us long for the way things were before, some of us long for the new things that wait just around the corner.

These are all very real aspects of being church together. The question is how we bring the love of Christ to these situations. How do we choose love over our own personal wants? How do we keep the focus on what is best for St. Luke as a whole rather than on individual desires? I’m not saying we aren’t all allowed, even expected, to like our own thing. I’m certainly not saying we all have to like the same things. What I am saying is that choosing love means choosing what is best for all, not just for me. Choosing love means choosing to believe that everyone here loves St. Luke as much the next person in the pew. Choosing love means choosing to trust the overall vision God has for us more than we trust our own personal wishes. As a wise elder said at Thursday’s Session meeting “I think a lot of the time it just comes down to me needing to put aside my personal preferences in favor of what is best for all.” That’s a hard thing for most of us human beings to do. But Jesus asks us to do it, and so we can try.

And it goes beyond the church walls of course. That guy that bumps you on the sidewalk? Choose love and walk on by. The driver that cuts you off on the Eisenhower? Choose love, slow down and maybe choose another lane! The coworker who gets the great assignment? Choose love and celebrate with her. Caught in the lure of negativity and gossip? Choose love and refuse to be a part of conversations that degrade, criticize, demean, or tear down others in any way. opportunities for love abound; they are all around us. The impact of love on the world is immeasurable. And the more we choose love, the more we will see it, the more chances we will find to spread it.

And one last note. Our daughter who was so upset at the pool? Who chose love? She wrote us a thank you note the next day where each member of their family listed their favorite things from the vacation. On her list? Sitting with all the family in the pool the last day! Maybe choosing love isn't just about the other person after all! Amen.