

ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

Maundy Thursday 2013 – John 13:1-17, 31b-35

A few Sundays ago, we prayed this prayer at corporate worship.

O God,
may your whole church worldwide be known,
not for its power and wealth,
not for its scandals and abuses,
and not for its failures and disunity,
but rather for its servant discipleship and sacrificial love.
We give you thanks for raising up your servant Jorge
whose deep love for the gospel
inspires and blesses the whole Christian community.
Give him, we pray, as Pope Francis I,
the strength and the courage
to renew and reform the Church of Rome
to the glory of your holy name.
May his proclamation bring about real change in our world,
challenging attitudes, policies, and practices
that *protect* those who are strong
and *make vulnerable* those who are weak.
In his proclamation, may all people hear afresh
your call to do justice, love mercy,
and walk humbly in the steps of Christ.

After worship that day, I reflected on that prayer, and how it sounded like something a Lutheran would pray. The word “reform” is the line in the sand Lutherans use to distinguish themselves in the wider Christian community – not quite Catholic; not quite Protestant; somewhere in the middle; quite comfortable with Anglicans, we’ve discovered. We call ourselves “the church of the Reformation.”

Interestingly, however, this was not a 500-year-old Lutheran prayer or a prayer rooted in the soil of doctrinal disagreement with the Catholic Church. Rather, it was a prayer from our time and for our time; a prayer that acknowledged not only the fruits of 50 years of ecumenism, the ecumenical consensus reached by mainline churches on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, the interdenominational benefits of liturgical renewal, and the reconciliation of Lutherans and Catholics represented in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed on October 31, 1999 – not just all of these amazing changes orchestrated from within the church, but also an acknowledgment of how irrelevant denominationalism has become in our post-modern, post-Christian North American culture.

Somewhere amid the scandals of a number of US televangelists in the 1990’s, I realized, when I started having to respond to my own parishioners in Stratford for the antics of Jimmy and Tammy Faye Baker, that Christians are all tarred with the same brush; that as much as we would love to separate ourselves from the scandal of the day, the option is not available. The media, people of different faiths, and people of no faith do not see the distinction of Catholic, Protestant, and Reformed. There is “the church,” and for all intents and purposes, for good or for bad, “the church” has become through some form of attrition “the Roman Catholic Church” – at least in the West. We speak of the Worldwide Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation, and delight in our impressive numbers when everyone is counted; but the critical mass of Christians throughout the world are found as Catholic. When a pope resigns and a new pope is elected, it’s news. When Justin Welby is enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury, Anglicans know about it; when Susan Johnson becomes the first woman in the Lutheran World Federation to become a national bishop, Lutherans know about it. And so, as strange as it may seem, the church is now more “one bread, one body” than it has been for 500 years – not so much by design, as by the wider community of the world making the decision for us. Somewhere along the way when we were all squabbling with one another, the world grew tired of many voices, and began looking for one message. And this shift from without has affected our life within the church. We recognize in one another, as Anglicans and Lutherans have, our commonality; and we even celebrate it. Lutherans do not feel as

distant from other families in the Christian church as they once did. And it may be the same for Anglicans. We work together, we worship together, we pray for one another. The sectarianism in the Christian community I experienced as a child now exists only in isolated circumstances and denominations, small groups for whom separation has assumed the weight of Christian doctrine in their understanding of holiness.

How does an ecclesiological discussion, such as this, relate to Maundy Thursday? Well, in the election of Francis I, it seems to me as if the church may regain some of its credibility as a force for good in the world. It seems as if there is a hunger for good news in our world, and that people are inclined to listen for it, if it is forthcoming. We are in a period of grace with the new pope, also known as the honeymoon, and it may be possible for all Christians to gather around him and find resonance with his proclamation of sacrificial love and servant discipleship. We know such things as our essential values, the things that mark us as a people and as a community of faith. Unfortunately, the church, and not just the Roman Church, has been known for far too long for its power and wealth, its scandals and abuses, its failure and disunity. Francis is a breath of fresh air because he reminds of us Jesus; because he reminds us of the call to be Jesus' disciples! He may well be a shrewd politician; he may well have to use his power to remove the old guard in the Curia; he will undoubtedly make enemies both within and without the church, and has already. But this pope proclaims the gospel with a clarity and a simplicity the world has rarely heard from someone with such visibility and influence.

In our new-found unity as Christ's church on earth, can we not see the hand of God preparing us, moving us toward an opportunity for renewal and rebirth? Can we not see Christ's real presence in our 50 years of inter-church dialogue and our efforts toward inter-communion? Can we not feel our Good Friday vulnerability as membership drops and churches close and, at the same time, recognize the hope that lies before us, if we simply love as Christ calls us to do? Love for the world? Love for one another? Servant discipleship that will actually help those who are poor and hungry and oppressed?

It is so tempting to focus on our deficiencies and shortcomings as the people of God, and not see Jesus pouring water into a basin and beginning to wash the disciples' feet. I read recently that many theologians are amazed that foot washing never became a sacrament of the church: it is such a profound sign of the radical love and service that stands at the heart of the gospel. It is such a clear sign that we are actually to *do something* with our faith that will bless others. Maundy Thursday is about love: Jesus' love for his disciples, but more importantly Jesus' love for the generations of disciples who will follow – you and me and all whom we seek in ministry and service.

Each Tuesday, Sheryl Loeffler and I meet to choose hymns for the coming Sunday. Between us, we come up with a long list of possibilities and, by the end of an hour, make decisions based on the appropriateness of the texts and the accessibility or familiarity of the music. Approximately three out of every five weeks, Great God, Your Love Has Called Us Here is on our long list. And probably 19 out of 20 times, I say to her that we mustn't use it this week; that we need to save it for Maundy Thursday. Without question, it is the best Maundy Thursday hymn in our book. But it is always a struggle to reserve it: I think we could/we should sing it every week.

With all of its portents of ultimacy, it is in what happens this night, when Jesus gathers his dear ones, when their beloved teacher becomes their servant, and when he commands them to do likewise – it is in these things that we receive our commission. As disciples and together as we form his church, we become those who are called *by* love, called *to* love, and called *to be* love. Essential Christianity.