

Love Feast

Long Green Valley Church of the Brethren
Glen Arm, Maryland
Maundy Thursday April 21, 2011

God's Welcome

Quiet Personal Preparation

Welcome

The word “welcome” is very old. It is derived from the words “willa,” which in Old English means “desired” (as in our “will” – what we most deeply want), and “cuma,” which means “guest.” This evening, you are a desired guest at the table of the Lord – welcome.

Please note that I have said this is *the Lord's table*. While this is taking place in our meetinghouse, using items we have purchased for events such as this, from tables and chairs to plates and glasses; and though it has been our deacons who have conscientiously prepared the meal and made all the arrangements; and while I have come up with a service of worship and others have prepared themselves to help me lead it – even so, this is the Lord's Love Feast. We are all, included those of us who have this day been busy getting ready for it; we are all desired guests at *the Lord's table*. Welcome!

We begin with a *Call to Confession*, a *Unison Prayer of Confession*, and an *Assurance of Forgiveness* on the back of your bulletin. Did you see who wrote them? David Miller is a former member of this congregation who is now pastor of the Black Rock church in Pennsylvania. In a way, he (and his family and congregation) are desired guests at our table this evening through these words. Would you turn to them now, and let us join our voices and our hearts and minds through them. I will read the *Call to Confession* and *Assurance of Forgiveness*. You will speak the *Unison Prayer of Confession*. Let us begin.

Call to Confession

Jesus commands us to love one another. Yet, sometimes we forget to love, neglect to show love, actively avoid love, or intentionally choose not to love. Then how will anyone know we are disciples of Jesus? Let us confess our failure to love one another.

Unison Prayer of Confession

Loving Jesus, you command us to love one another as you have loved us: a love without limits, boundaries, or restrictions. You stooped to wash the feet of your followers, giving yourself in humble service. You endured treacherous betrayal by one with whom you broke bread, and suffered cowardly denial by another who proclaimed absolute faithfulness. You chose to lay down your life for your friends; and in that act, you freed us to love without fear. We confess our failure to obey your command. Break open our hard hearts with your unfailing love. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Christ's love for us is the source of our love for one another. Be assured that his love is never-ending, and is always seeking to redeem and restore us. Praise be to God!

Hymn

“Love divine, all loves excelling”

592

Journey to the footwashing circles

(bring your hymnal with you)

God's Hospitality

Scripture

Luke 15:11-24

Thoughts along the way

At this point along the way of our Love Feast, we usually read the upper room account from the gospel of John where Jesus altered the usual Passover meal agenda with his disciples and added the element of footwashing. While washing feet was not unusual in that dusty day and age, such a practice was something that was done when welcoming a guest into your home. You didn't interrupt a meal to do it. But that's what Jesus did.

When I think of the gracious act of welcoming someone into my home, Jesus' parable of a wandering son welcomed home by his father comes to mind. It is a story rich in meaning, with multiple threads woven through its fabric. I propose that we allow this parable to quilt our time together this evening.

Remember how that son had reached the end of his rope. His desires had taken him about as far from home as one can get. How he got there is understandable. As the second-born son, his future was not guaranteed. Like Jacob in the book of Genesis, his brother was the one who would inherit the most important parts of their father's estate. Unlike Jacob, this younger sibling didn't trick his older brother out of their father's blessing. He just asked for his portion of the inheritance, that he might find his own way in the world. Then he took off for a far country.

In that distant land, he spent his inheritance extravagantly, which is what the word “prodigal” means. He was not prudent in tossing his money around. He wasted what he had. And found himself in dire straights, tending pigs, longing to eat what they ate – which, for a Jew, is about as low as you can get. Even there, however, he felt the tug of home. The end of his rope may have been but a tiny thread, but still he followed it back to his father. He presumed nothing, hoping only to become a hired hand. He had no dreams of being restored to his former position. He resolved only to throw himself on the mercy of his father, a man of integrity who treated his servants well.

From a distance this father spies a solitary figure walking in his direction. In the story we discover that this father's eye had never left the road upon which his younger son departed. And when he sees the familiar shape of his loved one, he races to him and embraces him and kisses him (almost to the point of embarrassment). The son barely has time to mouth the speech he has rehearsed before the father tosses it away and makes him a desired guest at his table. With a robe

and a ring he welcomes this prodigal son to his table. “*Kill the fatted calf,*” he shouts, “*and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*”

Do you see where I am going with this? You and I are this prodigal son. Our far country may not have been as distant as his but, if truth be told, we have all wandered. I know I have squandered the grace and goodness of God, my inheritance. You? I’ve put my time in with the pigs. Maybe not in so dramatic a fashion as the son in Jesus’ parable, but I’ve done my share of *tossing my pearls before swine* (Matthew 7:6). Am I that much different from you?

And yet, there is still this thread that leads home, and we follow it. And here we are. Let me say it again, you are a desired guest at the Lord’s table. So am I. Not because of all the good things we have done. As the prophet Isaiah said, “*all our righteous deeds are like a filthy rag*” (64:6). Even so, God has welcomed us, drawing us home. It makes sense that Jesus paused that celebration of Passover long ago to get down on his knees and wash his disciples’ feet - an act of hospitality. “You are desired guests at this table,” he was visually telling this misfit band of fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, and others – not exactly the cream of the crop. “And this is how you should treat one another.”

“And this is how you should treat one another.” We come to that time for washing feet, my brothers and sisters. I invite you to allow this familiar story from the lips of Jesus to flavor your receiving and giving of hospitality to one another. That’s what being a servant is, you know. When we serve in Jesus’ name, we are extending the welcome of our master.

(if there are newcomers among us:)

Our practice is to allow another brother or sister to bend before us and perform this simple act, and then to follow suit by doing so for the person on our other side. If washing feet is something new to you and you’re not sure about it, please feel free to admit it to the one beside you, the person who would wash your feet. That way they’ll know to skip on to the next person. You are then invited to simply observe. You are, however, encouraged – if you feel so moved - to try receiving and giving this act of love.

In the hands of your sister or brother, may you see the hands of our God, who is like that waiting father in Jesus’ story. Remember how he embraced and kissed his son (almost to the point of embarrassment). Now that is a kingdom of God kind of welcome!

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of these moments. May we sense your touch in the hands of those next to us. May our self-giving be your movement in us, welcoming home. Help us to receive, something we sometimes have a difficult time doing. And help us to freely share. We remember that we are your prodigal sons and daughters, acting at the invitation of the One whom we follow, your Son. In his name we pray. Amen.

Mutual washing of feet

(hymns sung as needed)

“I heard the voice of Jesus say”	493
“Beneath the cross of Jesus”	250
“When I survey the wondrous cross”	259
“Will you let me be your servant”	307
“Great is thy faithfulness”	327

Journey to the feasting tables

God's Table

Making sure everyone has a place

Scripture

Luke 15:25-32

Thoughts along the way

As radio commentator Paul Harvey used to say, “that’s the rest of the story.” Here is a sour note within a harmonious symphony of celebration, as if a violin is so out of tune that it grates your nerves, or a trumpet has blasted a wrong phrase at a very inappropriate moment. The older brother, who stayed faithful when his younger sibling did not, questions his father’s welcome in a most ungrateful way.

How he got to this point is also understandable. He had never entertained a thought of leaving, you see. Of course, as the eldest, the deck was always stacked in his favor. Still, he had done his father’s will from the beginning, never questioning ... until now. What does his younger brother’s return mean? This prodigal brat wasted his piece of the family pie. Does the remainder of the inheritance now get split up differently, allowing son #2 yet another piece, most of which would have belonged to the eldest? That’s not fair!

Police say that domestic squabbles are the worst calls to which they respond. Things can blow up quickly, even turn violent. People who know each other well, perhaps too well, can treat each other horribly. Siblings can be the worst offenders. It sometimes is easier to welcome a stranger to your table than one who has lived under your roof. Do you know what I’m saying?

Even as it’s “the rest of the story,” this is the unfinished part of Jesus’ parable. All the loose ends are not tied up. There is no resolution to the story. We don’t know how it will turn out, whether the older brother truly hears the invitation of his father, and sees that he also has a place at the table as a desired guest. In some ways, this elder sibling is as lost in this moment as his younger brother was when he tended the pigs. He is just as much at the end of his rope. Will he see the thread that remains and follow it home? The story doesn’t say, and that is on purpose.

It’s as if Jesus turns to us at this point and asks how we will complete it. What do you think happened? Did the older brother come to the party, or did he stay outside and stew in his juices? If he did step up to the table, where did he sit? Was it anywhere near his younger sibling, or were they positioned far apart on purpose? Did the father put them on either side of himself, or did he try sitting them down together? Did they talk? If so, can you imagine the conversation?

Do you see what I’m doing? These are suggestions for you to ponder and, maybe, talk with each other about as we eat together this meal around the Lord’s table. Unlike many congregations at Love Feast who remain silent throughout, we are a talkative bunch. Well, why not talk about this much loved story of Jesus and how you think it should have, or might in reality have, turned out?

We call this portion of our Maundy Thursday service the “agapé meal,” *agapé* being the Greek word for God’s kind of love, as opposed to other kinds of love. In that familiar parable of Jesus, we see *agapé* in action as a father lovingly deals with both of his sons. Will his *agapé* kind of love move his offspring in the direction of a brotherly or friendly kind of love, the word for which in Greek is *philia* (from which we get the name for that city of brotherly love known as Philadelphia)? More to the point for us today, will God’s love move us, as brothers and sisters

gathered around these tables, in the direction of love. Will God's love move us to love our brothers or sisters, our friends or neighbors, even those who are strangers to us or enemies (who sometimes are blood relations)?

The good news is that our welcome to God's love feast doesn't depend upon us first having this love business all straightened out. It is not by virtue of our loving actions toward others, or even dependent upon how well we have loved God, that we have received an invitation to the Lord's table. Remember that when Jesus sat and ate with his disciples on that long ago evening in an upper room, his band included one who would betray him, another who would deny him three times, and the rest who would simply run away at the first sound of trouble. As flawed as they were, they went on to become the body, the church of Christ. And God continues to draw his sometimes lost and squabbling children to the banquet table to feast on his love.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for this portrait of your love. In the waiting father, we see you – an eye ever watchful for your lost children, ready to race to and welcome us to your table. Whether we have wandered to distant places and wasted our inheritance, or have stayed close to home but, perhaps, have also lost our way trying to do what's right, still you embrace us and seat us at your feast. "We have to celebrate and rejoice," we hear you say, "because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." And we realize you are talking about us. Bless these moments we share around your table, the food prepared before us, the fellowship of our brothers and sisters. Help us though your presence in Spirit to complete the story and live out your love. Amen.

Feasting together

God's Feast

Hymn

"Far, far away from my loving father"

139

Scripture

Philippians 2:5-11

Thoughts along the way

As we arise and come to Jesus, we realize that he has already come to us. Return with me to that story he told of the prodigal son. Is it too much of a stretch to see in that son who grabbed his father's money and ran, another son who freely let go of his inheritance and intentionally traveled to a far country? This, in fact, is the story of Jesus. In coming to us, he "emptied himself," scripture says. That is, he did not journey to where we are all dressed up as we might expect a son of the most high God to be attired. If truth be told, he arrived rather simply. He set aside his "God-ness," if you will, and became like us, subject to the same limitations we face.

Along the way, he freely spent – gave away, really – what he did possess, the love of God. You might say he was quite wasteful in that regard, lavishing it upon people who didn't deserve it, or so the more respectable folks thought. Of course, others might say that this was true to form of the God of Israel, who wasted attention on an obscure group of Palestinians who

always seemed to be under the heel of somebody else. *“My father was a wandering Aramean,”* was the indentifying cry of this family of former slaves (Deuteronomy 26:5). It actually makes sense that a wandering Galilean by the name of Jesus would be the One God sent to bring all God’s people home.

Ah, that’s the difference between the prodigal son and the Son of Man, for Jesus didn’t run away from home. He was sent. And he traveled lightly, not all weighed down by his inheritance. As the song Paul quoted in his letter to the Philippians puts it, Christ Jesus *“took on the form of a slave.”* Does that sound familiar? Remember the pig sty of the prodigal son? Or, with our Jewish neighbors, remember the mud and straw of Egypt, when God answered the cry of those slaves long ago and delivered them from bondage?

There is a reason why the events of this week in the Christian tradition connect with the celebration of Passover. It was the blood of a sacrificial lamb painted on the doorpost of every Jewish slave’s home that caused the angel of death to *pass over* it on that night that was different from all other nights, thus making possible their deliverance. Our Christian scriptures see Jesus as this lamb, who *“humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross.”*

In a few moments we will remember this with some bread and juice. This, however, isn’t the dessert portion of our meal. It is, rather, central to all that we are and all that we do as followers of Jesus Christ. As we eat the bread and remember how his body was broken for us, then drink from his cup and remember how his blood was shed for us, we proclaim his death as a life-restoring act.

Remember how, in that parable Jesus told, the waiting father ran to his prodigal son and welcomed him home with wide open arms? That is a picture of God who ran to the tomb in which Jesus was placed and, on that first day of the week after Sabbath, on that brand new day of creation, rolled away the stone and embrace and raised his beloved Son to life! God *“highly exalted him and gave him a name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”* What a feast they celebrated at the Lord’s table! In our Love Feast this evening, we receive a taste of it, for it is a celebration that continues on in the realm of God. In fact, on that new heaven and new earth day, when the old passes away and the new is revealed – on our resurrection day, those who in Christ embraced as God’s sons and daughters will be welcomed to the Lord’s table.

Giving Thanks

With gratitude, Lord God, we have responded to your invitation to this feast. We try to mouth the words of our unworthiness, but you cast them aside in an embrace which leaves no question as to your love. You sent your Son to where we live, not as a pompous emissary, but as someone who has walked our walk, and is well acquainted with the mess of our daily life. In doing so, however, he has led us back to you. Jesus has not only told us the way, he was shown us. He didn’t just talk the salvation talk, he walked the salvation walk. So here we are at your table.

Bless this bread we will break, simple as it is, as a foretaste of your heavenly feast. Through it we remember how he was broken for our sake upon the cross, that we might be made whole. Bless this cup we will drink, simple as it is, as a foretaste of your heavenly feast. Through it we remember how his blood was shed as the lamb of God, that we might be raised from the dead.

This we pray in the name that is above every name. Amen

In song “Let us break bread together on our knees (repeat) 453, vs. 1
 When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
 O Lord have mercy on me.

The Bread

In song “Let us drink wine together on our knees...” 453, vs. 2

The Cup

In song “Let us praise God together on our knees...” 453, vs. 3

Unison Closing Prayer 789

Almighty and loving God,
we thank you that through your great love
you have fed us from our Lord's table
and have assured us that your goodness to us never fails.
We give you thanks that we are members of the body of Christ,
heirs with Christ and brothers and sisters in your family.
By your grace assist us in our pilgrimage
that we may go forth strong and faithful in our witness,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. AMEN

The Fellowship of Cleaning up

Thank you to all who prepared for this meal, who led in this service, or who otherwise made our time together possible. Scripture says that after their meal in the upper room, Jesus and his disciples then left for the Garden of Gethsemane. No mention is made of them cleaning up. However, tonight you are invited to join us in doing what needs to be done. The fellowship surrounding the act of cleaning up is not to be missed! If you need to head off, God bless you. Those who are able to stay and help. God bless you, as well.

Numbered items refer to the *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (prepared by churches in the believer's church tradition)
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