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Maundy Thursday Homily: A New Covenant

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

There is a difference between learning something and deeply knowing something, right? For example, with a small child, we can teach them that the stove is very hot and it will burn them and they can learn that and believe it. But they will know it differently, more deeply, after the first time they experience a burn. When we have felt our skin burn, deepens our understanding in a visceral way - now we know why we want to avoid something hot in a way deeper than words. You could say the same about so many things. Learning about falling in love and falling in love is a very different knowing. Learning about cancer and going through chemotherapy is a very different knowing.

How many of us would say that there are things that if you could have known “back then,” what you know now, based on your life’s experiences, you would have made some different choices? And how many of us also know that even if we could go back to our earlier selves and tell them exactly what to do and not to do, we wouldn’t have listened? Because we needed the experience. Because even when others teach us and explain things to us, and even when we believe them, we often have a desire to know it for ourselves in a deeper way. We might call this kind of knowing a knowing “in our hearts,” or knowing something “in our bones.”

Throughout this Lent, we’ve learned about all the ways God has tried to partner with us and create a lasting relationship. To Noah, God promised never to destroy the earth again after the flood. To Abraham, God promised faithfulness – a promise that God will be with every generation and extend God’s blessing to all people. To Moses, God gave the ten commandments with the promise that, when followed, they would help the Israelites to deepen their faith and become a community who would be an example to the rest of the world of who God is and the good which can come from partnering with God. Taking it even further, through God’s provision of manna and water in the desert and striking down the snakes, God showed Moses and the Israelites how God can bring life out of death when we trust God. And we didn’t talk about God’s covenant with David, but God promised David that one of his heirs would become king of all the nations.

All these promises mattered and helped people learn more about God and believe in God. But still, people strayed from the covenants. People consistently found themselves in conflict with other people and continued to allow horrible injustices to exist. People kept coming to the temple with their animal sacrifices but still fell short of truly partnering with God and putting God above all else. The Old Testament shows us how the people broke the covenants again and again. And the prophets talked of a time when God would make a new covenant with the people.

Enter Jesus. Jesus was from the family of Abraham and so could bring God's blessings to all the generations. Jesus was a faithful Israelite who followed the law of Moses. Jesus was from the line of David and so could extend God's justice and peace to all people. Through Jesus, God renewed God's covenant and opened it to all people, everywhere. In Jesus, we learn what it looks like to be faithful. In Jesus, we see what it means to partner with God. And when Jesus offered the bread and cup to his disciples and said "this is the new covenant" we see how he was the fulfillment of the hopes of the prophets. His words let the disciples learn and believe it.

But he didn't stop with words. Jesus told the disciples he was the new covenant. Jesus gathered them, his closest followers and friends, into a room where they could celebrate the Passover meal together. Passover is one of the most sacred and meaningful acts of the Jewish faith. It is a meal centered around God's saving act of bringing the Israelites out of slavery and into the promised land. It is the retelling of how God freed them and made them God's covenant people, again. That was the story hanging in the air around them when Jesus told them he was the embodiment of the new covenant.

Because then he stopped talking and washed their feet.

There may be almost nothing as binding and sacred as having one's physical body cared for by another. Parents know this the first time they bathe their newborn, a long-married couple knows when one grows ill and needs help with basic daily functions, an adult child knows as they brush their aging mother's hair, we all know this when someone slips their hand into ours or dries our tears or offers us a hug right when we need it most. There is an intimacy and vulnerability in allowing yourself to be physically cared for by anyone, but especially by the person you admire and love the most.

And Jesus not only offered the disciples this intimacy, but in that culture, it was entirely out of the question that your teacher, your rabbi, would “lower themselves” to do such a task. But with this one, simple action of washing their feet, Jesus helped them to know something new and profoundly deep about what a relationship with God looks like. Jesus wrote the new covenant on the disciples hearts that night so they knew, in the deepest parts of themselves, that God would never destroy them; that God loved all of them even though they would betray and abandon Jesus; that this relationship is a partnership, no longer based in a master/servant model, but in mutual love; that God would continue to bring life out of death; that they would never be alone and they would always be forgiven.

Certainly the disciples were able to go out and spread the good news of the gospel after the resurrection because of all they learned following Jesus those three years, but when they doubted or felt afraid or were losing hope or it would have been easier to just go home, I would bet they thought about this night, in that upper room, with Jesus gently wiping their feet with his towel. They persevered because they knew the new covenant in their hearts. And others were convinced of their story because people can tell when someone is just repeating facts and when someone truly knows what it is they are saying.

Which brings us to today, to us. Generations of people have continued to learn and believe, to teach and spread the good news. We do that here with Sunday School and Confirmation and book groups and bible study and sermons. And that is important and good and matters. Sometimes it is in that learning or studying that we come to know things more deeply in our hearts.

But, most of us came or we stayed here because either we have had an experience that’s helped us to know God in the deeper parts of our hearts or because we are searching for that knowing. Which is why we tell these stories year after year and why we encourage each other to share our own stories and why we sit around meal tables and come to the communion table and sometimes hold each other’s hands because sometimes, not always, but more often than we’d guess, we come to know God in those moments in a deeper way. Sometimes, together, we find the new covenant has been written on our hearts and we know it so deeply and so true that we cannot unknow it.