

Maundy Thursday.07

On this day, in Jesus' lifetime, the cross upon which he was to die was being prepared. Someone had to get it ready. Maybe it was hauled out of some grungy storage cave; maybe an axe was taken to it, to make the rough finishing touches; perhaps some soldiers, who'd rather have been eating dinner with their families, were instead yet again trudging this cruel instrument of death to the palace in order to execute yet another unknown, faceless criminal. Anyway, also on this day of cross preparations, the Master, Jesus, was having his last dinner with his disciples. Far away in distance and spirit from ultimately bearing his cross, Jesus astoundingly, unaccountably begins washing the feet of his friends at table, and commands that they should love one another. This was Jesus' final commandment before his cross day starts.

Jesus demonstrated what meaning he attached to his words "love one another" by washing feet. Not his own, but others'. Love will be the way that God pierces the hardened, sinful hearts of humanity. There will be no other way. Love is stronger than the blade of a sword meant to draw blood and inspire fear. That's a leap of faith, I know. But, Jesus does it. And, Jesus commands us to do it.

The disciples were gathered around Jesus to celebrate Passover, as was his custom, Scripture tells us. Many customs of Hebrew history were gathered and present in that upper room this night. The time-honored customs of proper behavior between "teacher-student" and "master-slave" and "rabbi-follower" were all taken into the house that night. But, Jesus broke all those hide-bound customs: by taking rag and towel and water bowl to the feet of the disciples. With his love he split the customs wide open. He pierced them with an act of humble love; broke them wide open in order to make a new thing visible to his disciples - and us, too. The disciples are at first astonished and then embarrassed by Jesus' out-of-his-role action. Jesus' new action demolished the customs they thought they were to honor. Jesus brought a new and eternal custom into the house. From then on, the presence of God is like washing someone's feet. And, this new custom of love as humble service will disarm them.

None of this is possible without the cross, however. None of the disciples had even thought about a cross right then, or ever, as far as we know from Scripture. But Jesus knew. Bonhoeffer thought of the cross as being God's sword that pierces the world and breaks it open, making it ready for growing into the love of God. That Jesus was on the cross means peace for the world will come through him. That cross, the cross on which Jesus is to be hanged, the one being prepared even as he's washing feet, is God's sword of love for the world.

The question for us the Maundy Thursday is: does that matter and what shall we do about it? Does it matter that Jesus broke open the customs about how to show love to humanity? Does it matter how we will bear this cross of love into the world as we know it? Is the sword – the cross - of God's love real for us? Are our hide-bound customs real for us, or is Jesus' breaking them wide open real for us?

A story is told that a student of the renowned American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead asked his teacher one day after class: "How would you characterize reality?" Quite a question for a philosopher. Dr. Whitehead put his books down, sat in his chair for a very long time, then responded: "It matters. It has consequences." The cross of Jesus matters. And, through the love he demonstrates by washing feet, the cross has consequences. How will we bear this loving sword-cross in our actions?