

April 9, 2020 | Maundy Thursday worship service

TEXT: [Luke 22:7-22](#)

TITLE: Collective Memory

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

After my uncle's funeral, we gathered for lunch at one of his favorite restaurants. There were dozens of us, across three generations—aunts and uncles from two sides of the family; cousins and second cousins and neighbors and friends...After the buffet was set up, another uncle led us in the table grace that had been ours since childhood. In my family's home, we held hands and prayed it together every night. My Dad sat to my left and my mom sat to my right.

Again, we began with the sign of the cross, and I remembered one day when I was a child and my uncle Jim—the one to whom we had just said goodbye—had us all start our blessing over again, because, he said, the way I was making the sign of the cross “looked like I was swatting flies.” Then we prayed the prayer we shared again together on the day of his funeral—a prayer I know that is shared by many families. *“Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, by thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen.”* Our extended family continued as we had for years, *“May God provide for the wants of others. May the souls of the faithfully departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.”*

I noticed that by the end of the prayer, voices had dropped away. Not everyone in the room knew that our family's prayer had a second stanza. But there were still 3 generations praying together—generations who had gathered around tables for decades, even though we all hadn't been together in this configuration before, ever.

As I looked around the room, I realized how powerfully we were connected by our shared memories. They were a part of our make-up, and had become a part of our DNA so to speak. These memories became stories and these stories became traditions—traditions that identify us, traditions that anchor us, traditions that connect us.

We gather together this evening to celebrate once more a memory that became a story that became a tradition. We tell the story of Jesus gathered in an upper room with his disciples to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. We read this story in (each) gospel, and hold onto the words we remember—words that have shaped our collective memory even though they tell of a story that happened so long ago; words that formed a tradition that unifies (and sometimes divides) the church. We remember the story: of feet washed, of betrayal predicted, and of bread broken and wine poured. We remember that Jesus taught his disciples so much in that upper room—that love must be embodied, incarnate in deeds of humility and care. He taught that no one is better than another—that we ought not think too highly of ourselves, but that those with power or privilege should not elevate themselves over others but serve others—with compassion, attention to their needs, and a willingness to step into the messiest parts of others lives—even stooping low to wipe the dirt of their feet.

In word and in deed—and again around a supper table, Jesus reminded his disciples—all of US included—that we are all connected.

The sentence might sound trite, obvious, or even ironic as we worship together this evening over our devices. Connection has meant honoring the need to maintain a safe physical distance so that the spread of a contagious virus might slow down. Connection has meant a lot of Zoom gatherings; neighbors singing from their front porches or applauding medical workers during a shift change. Connection has meant checking in on each other through text or Facebook; sending grocery delivery to new parents rather than dropping off a casserole; or drive by Birthday parades instead of blowing out candles with grandparents and cousins and classmates trying to help blow candles out too.

Frankly, this new mode of connection is difficult. My son said it well when he said, “I don’t want to be a little bit close to people—I want to be all the way close to people! I want to go inside people’s houses and have them come to mine.” I want to hug you at the doors of the sanctuary and have the kids all crowd around me on the chancel steps during the children’s time. I want to have a birthday party for my mom and husband and son and hold a new baby that was born into our church family a few weeks ago. I want to look you in the eye when I serve you Communion.

As hard as it is, there is something fitting about reflecting on this manner of connectedness as we remember the story of our Gospel. See, Jesus knew that things were about to change in his life and the lives of his disciples. As he served and talked and fed, Jesus was teaching his disciples how to remain connected to him, to each other, and to those he came to serve even after he would leave them. A new normal was about to begin—one that would start with a season of great fear that would even bring some isolation. This new normal would transition into a season of joy as the Risen Christ would make himself known once more in the breaking of bread. But Jesus’ physical presence at their tables would soon transfigure into a Spiritual presence—a unifying presence, a guiding presence, a strengthening presence, a loving presence. But it would be different and take some getting used to.

Jesus taught the disciples the lesson they needed to know—and a lesson that might help us to remember now—that connection isn’t based on proximity. One doesn’t need to receive bread from the hand of Christ to be fed in the communion meal. Connection transcends location, intimacy transcends touch, unity transcends the ability to gather.

What connects us is LOVE. Christ taught that evening that love is the unifying agent—and love has no limits or bounds. His love could live on within them in powerful ways when they shared the love they received—serving others, being humble, pouring out the best of oneself, sharing a meal.

In the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup, Christ instructed his disciples to go and do likewise—to keep on keeping on—to LIVE OUT THEIR COLLECTIVE MEMORY so that the love they received might extend to all. Do this in memory of me,

Jesus said—not to that he could be a legend, but so that his act of servant-leadership and humble love might be a story that becomes a tradition that forges an identity and a connection among all who follow Christ.

They'll know we are Christians by our love, the song goes. May we, tonight, remember Christ's great love for us—expressed not only in that upper room, or on the cross or even in the empty tomb. May we remember that the God we worship and serve IS LOVE. God's love goes before us, strengthens us, encourages us, heals us, and connects us—even now.

In just a few minutes we will share a communion meal in our different homes. As we do so, may we remember that connection isn't contingent on proximity or touch or the ability to share the same loaf of bread. Our connection is anchored in the love of God for us in Christ—whose body was broken for us; whose blood was poured out for us—who overcame all in the world that might harm us, weaken us, or cause us to be afraid. God's love for us is so strong that it overcame our sin and even the sting of death.

Even as we are all so aware of all that separates us: germs and masks and geography—and even sometimes ideologies and experiences...may we celebrate the love that connects us: God's love for us in Christ, and our call to love one another.

Thanks be to God.