Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

Reflection

by The Rt. Rev. Steven A. Miller

A friend of my family used to say that Palm Sunday was her favorite day of the Church year because it was the only one that hadn't been commercialized. She noted there were no Palm Sunday Hallmark cards, stores did not hold Palm Sunday sales, and there wasn't a song about a Palm Sunday bonnet with all the fronds upon it.

While I am not sure I would say it is my favorite, I have often said Palm Sunday is the most honest day of the liturgical year. It is the day when our shouts go from "Hosanna, Hosanna to the Son of David!" in the liturgy of the Palms to shouts of "Crucify him, Crucify Him!" in our responsive reading of the passion at the Eucharist. If we are to fulfill the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength we have to begin with an honest admittance that our thoughts and actions often resonate more with the shouts of "crucify him" than they do with the shouts of "Hosanna." Only when we are honest and admit to ourselves that there is room for growth and improvement in our love of God and neighbor can we come to the place where we ask God for the grace to turn our hearts and help us to love God and God's way more deeply and fully. To love God fully and completely requires asking for help and allowing God to give us that help.

As I gaze on Jesus the crucified one and say, with the centurion at the cross, "truly this was the Son of God," I am again reminded that Jesus is the model for loving God completely. He showed us what it looks like, as one of our prayers states, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

The biblical word for this is *kenosis*—self-emptying. This is what the Apostle Paul is talking about in the epistle appointed for today. He

writes to the Church at Philippi and to us. "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8, RSV).

I invite you this week to ask God where you might need to be emptied that God might fill you more with his love, a love that fills all your heart, soul, and mind. But remember that this love is not something for you to possess, but to be given away to and for others as Jesus did throughout a life that led him to love's fulfillment on the cross.

Monday, March 26, 2018

Loving with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross.

—Philippians 2:5-8

Each Monday we have introduced a focus and spiritual practice for the week. It seems fitting to make the focus and practice for Holy Week, the final week of our Lenten journey, the overarching theme of this devotional: "Loving with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind."

Bishop Miller's inspiring Palm Sunday reflection reminded us of both the first and last step of Christian love. The first step is to empty ourselves of our own ego and pride so that we can make room for God's love to fill us. As he writes, "I invite you this week to ask God where you might need to be emptied that God might fill you more with his love, a love that fills all your heart, soul, and mind." He is reflecting on the words from Philippians where we are reminded that Christ is our model for humility and self-emptying love.

The final step of Christian love is to give the love of God away. As Steve writes, "But remember this love is not something for you to possess, but to be given away to and for others as Jesus did throughout a life that led him to love's fulfillment on the cross."

As we begin our journey through Holy Week, I invite you to reflect on both aspects of Christian love. Where are you being called to practice humility, to empty yourself of ego and pride so that you can make room for God's love to fill you? And in what way are you are being called not to simply possess God's love, but to give it away?

March 27, 2018

Tuesday of Holy Week

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.
And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 13

I have saved the Corinthians passage for today's reflection because it seems to be an appropriate guide for the remainder of our walk through Holy Week toward Easter. These words, written by Paul to the church in Corinth, are for good reasons some of the most well-known words ever written about love.

Several weeks ago we focused on the idea that love is a decision. We talked about how love is an act of the will and is something we choose to practice, which is a much more expansive understanding of love than merely thinking of it as a feeling. As we consider this reading from 1 Corinthians, we see that it does not talk about love solely as a feeling. Instead, it describes how love acts, and what love does and does not do.

Keeping in mind the idea that love is a decision, I invite you reread the passage from 1 Corinthians and see how it affects your reading of this passage. In what ways do you think it describes love as a decision?

Another way to read this passage is as a way to see how well we are living up to the ideals of love that it represents. Try reading the passage through and substituting the word "I" for the word "love," so that it reads, "I am patient; I am kind; I am not boastful. ..." As you reflect on moving toward this ideal of living out Christian love, what do you need to become aware of for yourself? Where might you need to work on continued spiritual growth?

March 28, 2018

Wednesday of Holy Week

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
—1 Corinthians 13:4-5

Holy Week began with the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem for the final week of his earthly life. Because many of us know the story of his entering the city while riding on a donkey so well, we may fail to realize the shocking nature of such an entrance.

If Caesar or Herod or a similar Roman official had been entering Jerusalem during the time of Jesus, their entrance would have been markedly different. They would have arrived in an ornate chariot pulled by a large team of mighty horses, surrounded by a large military presence on foot and on horseback, completely outfitted with the best weapons of their day.

The two different kinds of entrances point to two very different sources of power. Jesus' entrance is grounded in the power of love, vulnerability, and humility. The Roman officials' entrance is grounded in the power of force, fear, and control.

As the next few days of Holy Week unfold, notice how every choice that Jesus makes is grounded in love, vulnerability, and humility. Notice how he refuses to let his followers defend him with force. And as you reflect on the choices that Jesus makes, pause to reflect on your own life right now. When are you choosing to act like Jesus did, and when are you choosing to act from a place of fear and control?

Maundy Thursday

March 29, 2018

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

—1 Corinthians 13:5-6

During the long night in the Garden of Gethsemane before Jesus will face his painful death, we see the very human side of him struggling with what he is about to face. The Gospel of Mark tells us, "And going a little farther, Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'" (Matthew 26:39). When we read this in combination with 1 Corinthians 13, we see there is perhaps no clearer example of "love does not insist on its own way" than what Jesus did that day.

In the Gospel of John we read how Jesus expressed his radical teaching of love right up until the very end. "Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and to go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). One simple yet enduring expression of his loving them to the end was his choice to wash their feet this night—a hauntingly beautiful example of love not insisting on its own way, but in the way of serving others. This is also the night Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, a gift he left for us as a reminder of his love.

It is Jesus' actions in Holy Week that we remember and re-enact, actions that speak louder to us than even his words. As you remember his actions in light of our ongoing reflection on "Loving with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind," how are you inspired to practice a love that does not insist on its own way, a love that insists on doing God's will, not your own?

Good Friday

March 30, 2018

Love bears all things, endures all things.
—1 Corinthians 13:7

So much of what we have discussed about love during our journey through Lent is paradoxical. Love is not a feeling, but a decision. Love is not about getting one's own needs met, but about serving others. The best way to receive love is to give it away. Love is strongest when it is most vulnerable. Those who lose their lives for the sake of the Gospel will gain their lives.

Today we have the ultimate paradox when we find the Son of God, the savior of the world, hanging on a cross, dying the death of a common criminal. And once again, it is Jesus' actions that speak to us. He chooses to so fully enter into the injustice and suffering of this world that we forever know that God's love is with us, even in our darkest moments.

All of us have known suffering. Some of us who are reading this are experiencing suffering of some sort in our lives right now. How does the love manifested in Jesus' death on the cross help you, or how has it helped you, to "bear all things" and "endure all things"?

Holy Saturday

March 31, 2018

[Love] believes all things, hopes all things, …
—1 Corinthians 13:7

It is impossible for us to fully understand the emotional space the disciples found themselves in the day after Good Friday. The reason we can't is that we know how the story turns out. We know what happens on Easter Sunday, something they didn't know on that first Holy Saturday. Jesus' disciples must have been filled with feelings of deep grief, great doubt, shameful betrayal, uncontrollable fear, complete uncertainty, and perhaps even anger and rage.

While we may not be able to feel exactly what the disciples felt that terrible day, most of us have experienced our own "Holy Saturday" moments, times when we have experienced a devastating loss or trauma, made a terrible mistake, betrayed someone or have been betrayed, and/or have found ourselves filled with fear and uncertainty, unsure of the way forward.

Whenever I feel this way and am unsure of what is going to happen next, I find comfort in the wisdom of the Quaker saying, "way will open." This saying is grounded in the words from 1 Corinthians: "[Love] believes all things, hopes all things. …" It is not a naive or simplistic hope, but a deep and abiding hope, trusting that God will open a way forward, even when we cannot see one, or are unable to open a way forward for ourselves.

How does the Quaker saying, "way will open," speak to you? Have you ever experienced the truth this saying represents? How do you maintain hope when you have experienced a crisis that makes it hard to see a way forward?

Easter Sunday

April 1, 2018

Reflection

by The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner

Love never ends.
—1 Corinthians 13:8

Our six-and-a-half-week journey through Lent has brought us to this day where we can now share the Easter greeting, "Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed!" On this journey we have reflected deeply on what it means to love God with our whole selves, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We began looking at what it means to love with heart, soul, strength, and mind by reflecting on the gift of belovedness. Stephanie Spellers and Debra Maconaughey helped us to understand the importance of being able to both receive and give this gift. Cynthia Kittredge described for us how love often calls us to risk letting go and emptying ourselves. She also helped us see that, "In the strange logic of the gospel, this emptying will result in fullness and this dying will make all things well."

Jay Sidebotham reminded us that Jesus has a way of turning the tables upside down in our lives as he calls us to decide what it means to truly love God and our neighbor. Anna Courie, through the courageous sharing of her own story, showed us what it means to love in the midst of adversity.

We learned from Mark Bourlakas that when we give our whole selves to God, we can experience the healing power of God's love. Steve Miller reminded us that the goal of being filled with God's love is not to possess it for ourselves, but to give it away to others. Each of these reflections has enriched and deepened our understanding of what it means to love with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

This past week I have reflected on different verses from the well-known chapter on love—1 Corinthians 13. Today it feels appropriate to focus on the eighth verse of this chapter: "Love never ends." In the context of Easter, we are reminded that love never ends and that not even death can end the power of love. Easter reveals that love is stronger than death, and "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Do you ever find yourself feeling the love of someone close to you who has died—maybe a beloved spouse, child, parent or grandparent, or another loved one? The spiritual nature of love transcends the power of physical death. In the Gospel reading for Easter, the risen Jesus tells the women at the tomb, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10). They do not need to be afraid because Easter is proof that the love of God has no limits.

While it is true that love never ends, the journey we have been on together does now with the arrival of Easter. It has been an honor to walk this journey with you. In the name of the One who has risen from the grave this day, may you know the blessing of this Love that never ends.