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Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church
John 13: 1-35
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THE WHOLEHEARTED JESUS: GOD'S VERSION OF POWER"

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. If there is any doubt about Jesus' wholeheartedness, that Jesus is "all in" in every way for the cause of salvation of the world, let us observe with diligence, energy, compassion, and love the season that leads us to the day when Jesus laid down his life for us.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he answered, love God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. Then, he added a second, love your neighbors as yourself. He was building on a commandment given to the Hebrew people called the shema from Deuteronomy 6, "Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

With all your heart- There is it in the Old Testament and the New Testament, words from God.

Are we wholehearted in our faith? If you haven't guessed by now, I will be asking you this question for the Sundays in Lent that I am with you. Are we wholehearted in our faith? Or do we spend a lot of life's journey being half-hearted. As we seek to draw closer to a Jesus who was wholehearted in every effort to bring God to this world, maybe our Lenten examination can be about our own wholeheartedness; when it comes to living our faith, are we "all-in" or nor?

So, about this question of being "all-in" or not. We want to quickly respond, "Of Course!" But if we learn anything about us and our responses to Jesus in this Lenten season, it's that when we respond so quickly, it doesn't mean we respond so truthfully.

Let's speak for a moment about Jesus's addendum to the shema.

"Love your neighbor as your neighbor as yourself."

With all due respect, Jesus, are you kidding?

Understanding this word "neighbor" in its broadest sense as the Scriptures use it, when I actually put real faces on the word "neighbor" I have to think, "You really want me to love that person, Jesus, after what they've done? I guess I should be relieved that you haven't commanded me to "like" everyone. I only must love them.

What is this love that Jesus keeps talking about?

In our scripture this morning from John's Gospel, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. He was going to die. He is with his disciples in his final moments. What will be the words of this dying man to his faithful followers?

He says,

"Where I am going you cannot come. I give you a new commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples."

Of all the things, of all the final words Jesus could have said, what he chose was "Love one another as I have loved you." In her essay "If You Love," Debie Thomas writes about what Jesus did not say in these final moments.

"When death comes knocking and the Son of God has mere hours left to communicate the heart of his message to his disciples, Jesus doesn't say:

Make sure you believe all the right things.
Make sure you maintain personal and doctrinal purity.
Worship this way and this way only.
Don't wear jeans to church.
Jesus doesn't even say, "Read the scriptures." or
Pray every day. or
Preach the Gospel to every living.

He says, "Love one another."

He doesn't say, "This is my suggestion. Give it some thought."

He says, "I give you a commandment."

Jesus doesn't say, "Act like you love others as you grit your teeth and clench your heart."

He says, "Love as I have loved you:" Authentic, deep engagement, generous action, willing to be vulnerable, to move out of our comfort zones love Jesus is sort of asking for the impossible.

But, let's back up to the scene before Jesus gives this commandment. It's a familiar story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, a text that is often used for the Maundy Thursday service.

Gathered at this dinner before the festival of the Passover, the disciples were keenly aware that someone needed to wash the feet which would have been a ritual upon entering a household done by the servants. The disciples knew the pecking order. Quite frankly, it was servants whose job it was to wash feet, the least of these, and none of the disciples wanted to be the least of these. So, they sat there, feet caked with dirt. Then Jesus stood up, tied a towel around himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet.

They couldn't believe their eyes. When Jesus got to Peter, Peter's reaction was, "Well this isn't going to happen. Jesus you can't go around washing feet." Jesus' response was, "I know you don't understand now, Peter, but if you don't let me wash your feet, then you can't be part of all that I have done and all that I am going to need you to do because you're not going to understand.

Jesus was regarded as their Lord and Master, but by washing their feet, Jesus was abolishing all inequality between them. **Because that's what love does!**

The spiritual power that Jesus was modeling was not a power founded in hierarchy, position, status, or accomplishment. It was a power founded in a basin and a towel, the power of love.

The biblical scholar, Raymond Brown writes to remind us that the Last Supper is very different in the Gospel of John than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There's no breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup. It's the foot washing that stands at the same place in the meal-the action symbolic of Jesus' self-giving love.

Brown points out that throughout church history, the theology of communion has been controversial, who can come to the table and who can't. What does the bread mean-is it literally the body of Christ, is it a symbol, is it a memorial to Jesus, is it the spiritual presence of Jesus?

Would Christians have argued so fiercely if the "washing of feet" had been a sacrament?

Francis Gench in her book, "Encounters With Jesus" says, "Probably Christians would argue whether we should immerse the feet or sprinkle the feet, who would be allowed to preside over the foot washing, should women be able to wash feet (they probably would agree to that), do we switch out towels after each foot washing or are they shared (oh yuck), what if there's a pandemic, how does one do virtual foot washing?"

I do not know of any clergy who are not humbly honored to preside at a communion table. I do not know any elder or deacon who would shy away from serving communion. I could ask Tom or Lawrie or Judy or Mike, "Can you help with serving communion this Sunday?" It's almost guaranteed that they would say, "Sure, happy to do that."

But what if I said, "Tom, Lawrie, Judy, Mike, can you come this Sunday and wash some dirty feet?" I know clergy who won't have foot washing services during Holy Week. Frankly, it's not my favorite service.

The church I served did well with their attendance on services that are traditionally poorly attended in Protestant churches, services like Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. One year, the Worship Committee decided that we would have a Foot Washing service on the Tuesday of Holy Week. I preached on it the Sunday before hoping to help people understand what Jesus

had done with the disciples, what Jesus was modeling. Instead, I think it scared people off. We had six people attend that service including me and the director of music.

A leader of a Bible Study group told about the group at one of their meetings debating the wisdom of planning and asking for the Worship Committee's support of a foot washing service at their next monthly meeting. The chair of the Worship Committee was not supportive, "If we announce that the Bible Study group is planning a foot washing ritual for the next meeting, half of the group will not show up and the other half will spend the afternoon getting a pedicure."

Our feet are not the most pleasing, inviting part about us. We usually hide them with shoes. Touching one's feet and being the one whose feet are touched is an intimate experience. We are vulnerable. And our feet tell a story. They reveal us.

Fredrich Buechner wrote:

"If you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you."

But Jesus said this is how I have loved you; personally, intimately, just as you are, down on my knees with a towel and basin to clean off the dirt, to rub and comfort and to be with you, without hierarchy, each of us, children of God.

Oh my- the few words of this commandment that Jesus gave which a pre-school child could memorize is hard and costly.

I don't do it very well on many days. We do botch this commandment at times.

Like Debi Thomas writes, "I want to be safe. I want to keep my circle small and manageable. I want to choose the people I love based on my affinities and preferences, and Jesus' commandment sounds rather inclusive."

Now, I am going to make desserts and take them to people and ladle out soup in soup kitchens and write checks when needed and these are all great things that we are called to do and that are pleasing to God when done with a generous heart.

But loving as Jesus loved, being vulnerable to the world's pain and needs, being on my knees to wash dirty, calloused feet, to take the chance that my heart is going to break, to hunger for what is right for all God's children.

This is hard, and I will always have to work at this and only be able to work at this by the power of the Holy Spirit.

"And yet this was Jesus' dying wish Which means we have a God who first and foremost wants everyone of God's children to feel loved!!! Not shamed! Not punished! Not chastised! Not judged! Not isolated! But loved."

To love as Jesus loved is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. It's how the world will see, hear, touch, taste and find Jesus.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.

I don't know about you, but this causes me to tremble.

"But here's the saving grace. Jesus does leave us on our own. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful resource, a way forward. Jesus gives us Jesus. "Love as I have loved you."

Now, there are times in our lives when we do walk through intense uncertainty about whether God loves or not.

Many years ago, there was a family in our neighborhood who experienced an unimaginable heart-wrenching tragedy. There were no words. We all wanted to write hate mail to God for not intervening. It was the father in this family who ultimately got us all through this tragedy.

He didn't know if it was a dream or something that somehow was revealed to him.

He said that he wept constantly. One day, he was aware of not being alone in a different way.

He was surrounded by his wife, friends, family, the whole community with their tears.

But this day it was different.

He said, "God was there weeping with me even harder than I was weeping if that was possible.

Weeping about unexplainable tragedy in our world. It made me realize that God chooses not a

puppeteer in the sky pulling the strings, manipulating every move, stopping every horrible action that's done by one human being to another human being, halting a natural disaster, controlling all the cells in our body so that we don't get cancer.

Because a puppeteer can't love a puppet in the same way that a human can be loved and return love. God doesn't want puppets. God didn't create puppets. God created humankind.

God was weeping with me in my pain, suffering with me, while at the same time holding me close and assuring me that God will break us out from suffering, pain and death's grasp and brings us home to God.

"What wondrous love IS this?"

To love as Jesus loved is:

To weep with those who weep.

To laugh with those who laugh.

To touch the untouchables,

To welcome with generous hospitality
To forgive.
To release those who are captive and held prisoner by so many powers of the world
To feed the hungry.
To wash feet.
To hold one another close.

We don't do any of this on our own. Jesus's commandment is not that we should deplete our resources and be exhausted all the time. We can only love as Jesus loves us when we abide in the holy place where all love originates.

Rachel Held Evans in the book we will be discussing this week quotes Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann.

"The Hebrew word for "love" in the shema (**Love** the Lord your God with all your heart.) Is even bigger and wider than just "love." "Ahava rabbah" means deep love, big love, abundant, overwhelming, sweep you off your feet love, knock you over with love, love. Because this is the kind of love God had for the ancestors and has for us. And so often, we don't notice.

But we are commanded to notice. Notice that we are surrounded by, infused with and kept in this world by God's love which is the beating heart of the universe....."

And the power over all other powers.

Love one another as I have loved you. By this the world will know!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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