

Sermon for Thursday, March 24, 2016  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Last week  
I heard a sermon  
by one of the people  
training to be a deacon  
in our diocese.  
He was imagining the scene by the Sea of Galilee  
when Jesus meets the disciples  
after his resurrection.  
And Jesus gets in a conversation  
with Peter,  
Peter, who had been  
one of his closest friends and followers,  
but when things got tough  
denied him three times.  
You know the story,  
three times  
Jesus asked Peter,  
do you love me?  
And three times  
Peter replies,  
“Yes, Lord, I know that I love you.”

But the preacher imagined  
what that scene would have sounded like  
if Jesus had been  
from Brooklyn.

I can't do the accent,  
but the scene he imagined  
was very different.  
Jesus declaring  
he has no time for Peter,  
that he can't be trusted,  
and turning instead to James  
another of his closest friends  
and commissioning him

to build the church.

That imaginary alternative scene  
came to mind  
as I read the gospel for this evening.  
Because here too  
we see the theme of betrayal.  
Although it's not as obvious  
as it might be,  
because our lectionary left out some significant parts of the story.  
And they're parts that at least the gospeller, John,  
thought were important.

The way John tells it,  
it's the night before Passover,  
and Jesus is sharing a meal with his friends.  
A meal  
that he knows  
will likely be his last with them;  
he knows  
that he is about to be betrayed;  
he knows  
that one way or another  
he is about to face  
death.

And John prefaces his description of that meal  
with the comment  
that Judas, one of the chosen twelve,  
Judas  
is already  
planning to betray him.  
But Jesus doesn't say anything about it  
early on;  
he sits and eats,  
and then he inexplicably gets up  
and begins to wash his disciples' feet,  
over, of course, the protests of our friend Peter.  
It's not until  
he sits down again,

that he says - and this a part that our lectionary has left out -  
he sits, and looks around, and says,

“One of you  
is going to betray me.”

The disciples, John writes, the disciples look at one another, uncertain who he is speaking about.

And that makes me wonder.

Is it just Judas  
who has thought of betraying him?

Or have all of them considered it,  
one time or another?

Are they all feeling  
that uneasy mix

of blame  
and self-righteousness  
and fear.

Peter of course blurts it out.

“Who are you talking about?”

And Jesus says, “It’s the one I’m giving this piece of bread to.” And he gives it to Judas,  
and then tells him to go do what he has to do.

It seems pretty obvious,  
but somehow  
the rest of the disciples miss it,  
and when Judas leaves,  
they assume  
he’s being sent to do some last minute shopping.

Our lectionary picks it up again at this point,  
with Jesus talking about going somewhere,  
and loving one another.

But that’s not the end of the story.

Because Peter - yes, it’s Peter again -  
Peter asks Jesus  
where he’s going.

And in the conversation that ensues,  
Jesus tells Peter  
that he will deny him  
three times.

It's interesting  
that in the gospel according to Mark,  
Jesus says that all the disciples  
will abandon him;  
Peter, of course,  
says he won't,  
and so do all the others.

And so there are three levels of betrayal  
in this story of the last supper,  
Jesus will be betrayed by Judas,  
denied by Peter,  
and abandoned  
by his disciples.

Which is of course,  
what happens.  
First Judas  
leads the soldiers to Jesus  
betraying him  
with a kiss;  
then Peter  
sits in the courtyard outside Jesus's trial  
and denies him three times;  
then the disciples abandon him  
leaving him to face the cross alone  
except for John  
and the women.

That's where they are heading  
that first Maundy Thursday.  
But it's not only  
a story of betrayal.  
Because wound throughout  
is the story our lectionary had us read,  
the story  
of a Savior  
who shows his love for his disciples  
through all of this.

First of all  
he does it in action.

Jesus gets up  
in the middle of the meal,  
takes off his jacket,  
ties a towel around his waist,  
and washes his disciples feet.

All of them.

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew,  
James and John, the sons of Zebedee,  
Philip and Nathanael,  
Thomas the twin and Matthew the tax collector;  
James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;  
Simon the Zealot  
and Judas Iscariot.  
Yes, Jesus even washes  
Judas' feet.

And then he puts his jacket back on,  
and tells them  
that just as he has washed their feet,  
so they should wash one another's feet.  
In other words,  
be servants of one another.

Yes,  
even Judas.

And then, after Judas leaves,  
Jesus shows his love for his disciples  
in words.

He says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Remember, the eleven remaining disciples  
have no idea  
that Judas has headed off to betray Jesus.  
Love one another.

Yes, even Judas.

And then Jesus adds the kicker.

You Peter,  
are going to betray me.

And you all  
are going to abandon me.

But I love you.  
Love one another.

Yes, Judas,  
yes, Peter,  
yes, one another.

What does Jesus do  
to prepare his disciples for betrayal,  
and denial,  
and abandonment?

He tells them to serve one another,  
to love one another.

Just as he serves them.  
Just as he loves them.

Sometimes we forget  
how incredibly challenging the gospel is.  
We live in a culture that says  
that the best way to deal with being abandoned,  
the best way to deal with being denied,  
the best way to deal with being betrayed  
is to put up walls,  
whether figurative  
or literal.

The response of many  
to the bombings in Brussels  
has been to call for more border controls,  
more surveillance,  
more suspicion,  
more fear.

Just as the response of many to personal experiences of betrayal and abandonment

is to put up walls within their own lives,  
to focus on protecting themselves,  
to avoid trust,  
to treat the whole world  
with suspicion.

But Jesus says,  
whatever the threat, whatever the fear,  
we are to love one another,  
to serve one another.  
Even when we risk being hurt.  
It's a challenge, isn't it?

Especially in a world  
where there are terrorists waiting to attack,  
and refugees flooding in through unsecured borders.  
But it's telling  
that today Pope Francis went to a shelter for refugees,  
and washed the feet of Christians, Muslims and Hindus  
in front of a congregation of asylum seekers.

That's what loving service looks like - even when we might be betrayed.

And the other side of it is that most of us,  
    some time or another,  
will deny Jesus.  
We'll avoid  
doing what he says.  
We'll neglect to keep our promises  
to follow him.  
We'll fail as Christians.

But Jesus still loves us,  
whatever we do,  
Jesus still loves us.

Peter is the evidence for that. Jesus didn't  
just throw him aside after he denied him,  
hand over the job of building the church  
to a different disciple.

No, Jesus forgave him,  
and restored him.  
and never stopped loving him.

Jesus loves us.  
And that's what makes it possible  
for us to love one another.  
Even when we fail Jesus  
and fail one another.  
It's Jesus love for us  
that makes it possible  
to respond to betrayal  
and denial  
and abandonment  
with love.  
And it's that  
that will let people know  
that we are followers of Jesus.  
Not saying the right words,  
or wearing crosses,  
but loving and serving,  
just as our Savior  
has loved and served us.

And so, as we leave these tables  
and move to the table of our Lord  
sharing his body and blood,  
as we strip the altar  
and bare the sanctuary  
for the remembrance of his passion,  
remember  
how much he loves us,  
not because  
we are extra holy,  
not because  
we are perfect,  
but because  
we are his friends.  
And love  
one another.