



Bloch's iconic depiction of the Angel comforting Christ in Gethsemane

When I was a child, there was a phrase I would often hear from my parents. If I said, “I’d like to go to that movie,” my mother might respond. No, that’s not an appropriate movie for you.” And, when I would say, “But, Mom, all my friends are going,” she would often say, “I don’t care.” And of course, she did care very much. That’s why she was saying “no.”

Tonight, we hear of the Exodus. This account is frankly, fantastic. Not in the sense of being untrue. Rather, the plagues on Pharaoh, the Nile turning to blood, the passing over of the Angel of Death sparing only those of households the doors of which have been sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the parting of the Red Sea – all of these events really do rise to the level of being fantastic, above and

beyond the realm of what is normal in our earthly lives. But then, God has never really been interested “normal.” And when sceptics ask me, “Well, just how do you think God accomplished the parting of an entire sea?” I find myself quoting my mother. “I don’t care.” Because you see, for me the key question here is not “how” God did something – which I’m sure is beyond human understanding anyway. No, the key questions about so many of this night’s events begin not with “How?” but with “Why?”

Tonight is the night of betrayal, the night of utter humility. This is the night of Our Lord’s condemnation. Of the agony in the garden. There are some many things about this night which leave us to wonder “Why?” For example, why did Jesus wash His Disciples feet?

Certainly part of it was to be an example to us as to how we are to truly be His disciples. This passage from John yields my New Testament guide verses, Jn.13:34-35. They are the verses my life and ministry are founded on. Notice how we are not just to love one another. You’re all pretty loving people. Donna and I have certainly witnessed this love as you have welcomed us into your church family. It’s not such a hard job for James Barnhill to love His flock at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. Because, warts and all, you’re really quite loveable people!

Oh, but in John 13:34-35 Jesus says we are to love each other ***just as He loved us***. And that means, sometimes, completely humbling ourselves before one another. So, we have this example of absolutely humbled, perfectly selfless love, the love of Our Lord on this night. That is the way, Jesus says, that the world will know you are mine, if we love like he did.

And, it would seem that there are no reasonable escape clauses in this kind of assignment that you and I are taking on. I don’t know if you’ve thought about this, but did you realize that Jesus washed the feet of all of his 12 friends, and that means he washed the feet of Judas too. That’s the kind of “no holds barred” love you and I are to practice.

This year, as I was reading the passage from 1st Corinthians Chapter 11, the Spirit drew me to a rather strange phrase Paul uses. This passage in Paul’s letter is most likely the earliest Biblical account of the Lord’s Supper that we have. The Corinthian Correspondence probably, predates the earliest of the Gospels by at least a few years. In reading it this year, something occurred to me which I had not seen before.

Paul is very careful to instruct us that we should never come to this Sacrament of The Lord’s Supper without “discerning the body.” (See 1Cor.11:29) We need to truly discern Jesus – we are to seek and see Jesus if we are to participate in this fellowship of believers in a way that does not bring judgement on us. To discern Jesus in this sense seems to me to be very much in keeping with what our Lord says in Matthew 18, when he assures us that “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also.” So, if Christians are truly gathered together on the Lord’s Day, if we come together in Jesus’ name, if we call ourselves the Fellowship of Christ, his presence should be as clearly discernable here as the nose on my face. At least, that’s true if we’re really a church, in the most powerful sense of the word. This place cannot be just a social club for lonely hearts and broken egos. It must be and remain much more. Because The Father, and his Spirit, and the risen Lord call this place home. So, by heaven we need to make sure those three are the most important members of this Congregation.

So the body of Christ the Fellowship of believers is to be a place where Christ is clearly **discerned**. And I discovered this year that the word Paul uses to describe this “discerning” of Jesus in the fellowship of Christians is the Greek word *diakonos* from which we get the term “to diagnose.” So, this branch of God’s family tree known as St. Peter’s Episcopal Church should be a place so riddled with Jesus, so permeated with his love, so dripping wet in the awesome presence of the Lord that anyone can witness what we do here and make the clear diagnosis that, yes, those people are absolutely, completely, and incurably in love with their Lord and Savior.

What’s the symptom of that wonderful disease that we call *agape*, the selfless love of God and neighbor in the fellowship of believers? What is the chief symptom of this beautiful contagion of our salvation in The Lord? Well, it seems to me that discerning the presence of Jesus in the life of the church is most clearly manifest in the unity we share when we are truly present in the Lord.

Now I don’t believe that means Christians have to always be in complete agreement with each other, or that every decision a church makes needs to be unanimous. But, there is a certain plain of existence that faithful brothers and sisters in Christ can reach when they come to a place of understanding that their own desires and convictions concerning a certain matter need to take second- place in order that the Kingdom of God and his plans for his church might prosper. This is as different from the concept of human compromise as chalk is different from cheese. To discern the presence of Christ in the decisions we make with each other is NOT to bend our wills to fit grudgingly into some form of compromise where we believe we have somehow lost a portion of our dreams by acquiescing to the desires of others. No! To discern Jesus in our dealings with one another is to selflessly set aside our preconceptions – to place our point of viewing the world on the shelf of tolerance and mercy for a moment, and examine the universe from the pain of someone else’s perspective. This is, in fact, how we are Spiritually enriched, and how we grow in Christian maturity and Spiritual wisdom. We must be willing to discern the presence of Christ even in those very different from ourselves, **especially** in those very different from ourselves is we are to become the mature disciples God can use to bring about the fulfillment of His Kingdom. In discerning Jesus even in ways which might not be so familiar or comfortable to us, that is surely what it means to live out our lives in the fellowship of believers in a manner pleasing to Our Lord, loving as Jesus loved us on this night of his struggle.

It’s easy to worship the Lord God when He is seated on the throne of His majesty. But this night, something else, something more is taking place. We are children of the God who kneels before us in humble nakedness and washes our feet. Again, the question comes: “Why?” I mean, a **God** wouldn’t do **that**, would He? It defies the very definition of what being a God is all about! So maybe this night was to prove to us that Jesus was something else – something perfect, yes.

But as well as the perfect God, He is also and foremost the perfect man, who abases himself in all his humanness, and reaches down in humble service to wash our feet. Surely then, it's not such a stretch for us to put our intolerance and preconceptions on the mercy seat for just long enough to hear, and learn, and bear some of the pain of those around us.

Lastly we cannot talk about this night without one last “Why?” Why was Gethsemane necessary? I believe The Father lead His son into that garden of agony to **prove** his humanness. In the way that a master baker “proves” the risen dough in a final heated chamber before placing it in the fiery oven to bake and harden, so Jesus was proven in the agonizing struggle of Gethsemane.

Yes, with his Cross of Friday afternoon and his Resurrection of Easter Day, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ vanquished death and proved his deity. But it is this night, in Gethsemane where the real proving ground of Christ's humanness takes place. And I believe this has to do with Jesus' gift to us to meet us in our own dark nights of pain, and shoulder for us all the fear and doubt that we cannot bear ourselves.

Because, dear ones, we all have crises of faith. This world is by definition a place of uncertainty. But after the events of this night, we are absolutely consoled even in those moments when we give ourselves up to despair and lose sight of the guiding hand of God. Because, you see, Our Lord has been there too. He has struggled with this same despair and fear. We don't have to walk a mile in His shoes because he has walked that last mile in ours. And so we serve a God who absolutely knows the depths of human despair.

So, in our moments of grief, and anger, and remorse, and bitterness, and isolation there is one whose faithfulness can bear it all because he has born it all. And in those times of darkness, he stands waiting, mighty to save. And if we call to him, he comes to meet us there, there in the garden.”

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