

Maundy Thursday

Holy Trinity Episcopal Church

The Rev. Leslie M. St. Louis

In Blackwater Woods

by Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
 whose meaning
 none of us will ever know.
 To live in this world

you must be able
 to do three things:
 to love what is mortal;
 to hold it

against your bones knowing
 your own life depends on it;
 and, when the time comes to let it go,
 to let it go.

"In Blackwater Woods" by Mary Oliver, from *American Primitive*. © Back Bay Books, 1983.
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I believe Mary Oliver's poem aptly describes where we are in our journey this week. We gather just as the disciples did that last night clothed in our sorrows, seeking one last touch, wanting to hear one more story, needing just one more....one more.....one more.

Some months ago I had a rather frantic call from a friend of mine telling me that her baby brother, who is 53, was in Cedar Sinai with what appeared to be a life threatening brain bleed. She asked if I would pray for him...of course. She said she was flying out to California...of course. She said she would be in touch when she knew something more...of course. It was many hours later, in fact early the next morning when I finally heard from her and she recounted sitting at his bedside throughout the night...of course, and shared her fears that he might not live...of course and told me that she had spent the night rubbing his feet. What?

"Ummmm...rubbing his feet?" I stammered, you know, I expected praying or petting his head or holding his hand but rubbing his feet was nowhere on my radar.

"Yeah foot rubs are special treats in my family, you know you are really loved then. I thought he would know I was with him if I did that." She and I sat in the depths of silence for a few minutes pondering the magnitude of the last hours and those to come. "You know Les, I just want him to know that I'm with him even if he has to go."

Jesus is spending the last night with his beloveds; a night that is consumed with sorrow and the weightiness of impending loss. This is a difficult and uncomfortable place for many of us to be, not just Maundy Thursday but the whole of Holy Week. We live in the land of happiness and the pursuit thereof. We are programmed to stray away, in fact to run as fast as we can from anything that resembles pain or sorrow or suffering and yet the entire course of Holy Week draws us ever deeper into suffering and sorrow and pain.

Holy Week is not about pursuing happiness. And that may be why so many Christians, in America, avoid it. Holy Week is not about healing, if healing means that life will be like it was.

Holy Week is about surviving with a broken heart, and cherishing that brokenness, so that your life is transformed by it.

Maundy Thursday is the story of Jesus keeping the Jewish Passover with his friends. Passover is a festival that seeks the way to the future in revisiting the past. David Brooks, who is Jewish, wrote last week in an op-ed in The New York Times, *the big thing that suffering does is it takes you outside of precisely that logic that the happiness mentality encourages. Happiness wants you to think about maximizing your benefits. Difficulty and suffering sends you on a different course.*

Brooks quotes theologian Paul Tillich, who wrote that *people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routines of life and find they are not who they believed themselves to be. Try as they might, they just can't tell themselves to stop feeling pain, or to stop missing the one who has died or gone. And even when tranquility begins to come back, or in those moments when grief eases, it is not clear where the relief comes from.*

Jesus has gathered with his friends and this night he wrestles with the steps he will next take and wrangles with the anguish of never seeing these ones again, never hearing their voices, never feeling their touch. And so he seeks just one more....one more. And after he has broken the bread and given them the everlasting remembrance of his body, after he has blessed the cup and given us the quench of life eternal after all of this he takes a basin and a towel and sits to wash their feet. To hold and caress their very souls. Perhaps assuring himself in that moment, in those touches that he can indeed let them go.

And so Jesus, the Beloved, his name, – given to him at his baptism in the Jordan – now shares that name with us and it has new meaning: not fairytale happiness, but a call to commitment, a call to -- to the very vulnerability that caused his suffering and causing ours. Now we are bound together, a community with a vision, a shared vision rooted in sorrow. So we move from this place with our sorrows rapping us like a robe, cupping our broken hearts in our hands but feeling with each and every step that touch on our soles that lingers there to transform our lives.

Amen!

