

Sermon – John 13:1-17, 31b-35
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Grace Lutheran Church
Maundy Thursday – Year A
9 April 2020

“Absent No More”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Absence, they say, makes the heart grow fonder. They’ve been saying this since before the time of Christ, when the Roman poet, Sextus Propertius, wrote, “Always toward absent lovers love’s tide stronger flows.” Hey, it worked in our life. As some of you know, Erika and I met and started dating shortly before she moved to Slovakia to teach English for a year. Since we didn’t know one another that well, and because Slovakia is a long way from Wisconsin, we broke up before she left. Sometimes when she tells this story, she says she broke up with me. But she’s not in this pulpit tonight, and I assure you it was mutual. A funny thing happened after she left. We started to miss one another, and then to make expensive phone calls to each other on Sunday afternoons. A love that we didn’t know was there flourished and grew while we were apart. A year later, she returned and the rest, as they say, is history.
2. I wonder, however, if absence really makes the heart grow fonder or if it is simply true that absence, physical separation, cannot undo love’s power. I mean, I certainly like to think that Erika and I would have gotten married anyway. Perhaps this is a case of correlation not implying causation. In other words, just because absence and love both exist doesn’t mean that absence causes love. Really, it’s just the other way around. Love, by its very nature, overcomes absence. It refuses to be properly distanced. Love cannot be quarantined.

3. We gather this evening, separated but together, in worship of Jesus Christ, love incarnate. As we enter the Great Three Days that stand at the center of our faith, we hear again Jesus' command, the mandate from which Maundy Thursday gets its name: "Just as I have loved you," Jesus tells us, "you also should love one another." How has Jesus loved us? With a love story that insists on overcoming obstacles, closing distances, and bringing back together that which was once torn apart.

4. This love, sung from God to God's people, did not begin in that upper room in Jerusalem when Jesus spoke these words. Our story begins in the land of Egypt with God's people bound and enslaved. Long had it been since they'd seen their homeland. The years had seen generations rise and fall under Egypt's mastery. But God remembers the people, for God loves them. God will not let them languish any longer. Each family takes a lamb, puts its blood over their doors, eats, and leaves. They had been 400 years in Egypt. It will take 40 more to journey home. But exile has come an end, for the Lord will not let their long absence last. Love, especially God's love, overcomes absence, distance, and separation. The God of heaven does not stay far off but enters into the mess of human life to bring God's people home.

5. It is no wonder that Jesus chooses the Passover festival as the moment to fulfill the pledge and promise of a God who so loves the world that the only Son would be given, lifted up for the salvation of all who would call on him. Jesus kneels, takes cracked, dusty feet in his hands. Peter objects, feels Jesus is too close, but Jesus insists. The grime of sin and mortality, caked on our souls, will not keep Jesus from us. Jesus takes bread, wine, and consecrates a new Passover meal, a feast of eucharist, thanksgiving. Remember that Lamb whose blood your ancestors put above their doorposts as they were saved from exile? The Lamb now is me, Jesus says. My blood covers your life, redeems you from exile, brings you home into the Promised Land of

everlasting life. Jesus' love for us is such that it brooks no distance; he puts his body in our hands, wants his blood coursing through our veins.

6. This time of sheltering in place due to the coronavirus is trying for all of us, but it is nothing compared to the isolation wrought by our sin, the quarantine that is the tomb's grip on us. But love, divine love, overcomes all obstacles. While we sought to separate ourselves from God, to go our own way, God insisted on loving us anyway. The unfolding story of this night is of the Christ who refuses to be kept at bay. Who insists on being with us. Who joins himself to us in death that we would be joined to God in life. Our absence from God does not make God love us more. Rather, the distance God covers in coming to us reveals just how deep is the Father's love for us.
7. Tonight, we see Jesus kneel at our feet, even though no feet will be in my hands. Tonight, we hear Jesus institute his Supper, even though we wait to eat and drink. Tomorrow, we will see Jesus' love on full display, his life given over to death on a cross. Look, and behold the love of God that crosses even the final obstacles of sin, death, and the devil. To forgive us, to resurrect us, to set us free. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Behold the cross of Christ, on which was hung the salvation of the whole world. Behold what true love looks like, and then hear and heed Christ's call. Love like *that*. Christ commands you. But first, look. In worship and praise, look. God is coming, closing all the distance that was once between us, erasing the separation between us now, drawing us together in the great, self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.