
Outrageous Love

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
Maundy Thursday – Year A**

In his book *Least Innocent Blood be Shed*, historian Philip Hallie tells the story of Huguenot pastor Andre Trocme and his neighbors in the little town of Le Chambon in southern France.^[1] During World War II, Pastor Trocme and his fellow villagers saved hundreds of Jewish children from deportation to concentration camps and harbored them right under the noses of Nazi sympathizing Vichy government officials. The story is a remarkable and moving one. You see, the Jewish children brought to Le Chambon were not just hidden by the people there, they were actually welcomed into, and embraced by, the community. They were given food and clothing, families with whom to live, and false names and documentation to protect them from detection by the authorities. They went to school with the other children of the village and played outside with them when the weather was nice. After a while, people almost forgot who had been born in Le Chambon and who had been brought there to escape death.

Eventually, though, the day everyone in town had been fearing arrived. An informant tipped off Vichy officials, and the police appeared at Pastor Trocme's home to arrest him. Just as they were about to handcuff him, however, an odd thing happened. Greeting his captors at the front door, Andre Trocme invited them inside to eat dinner with him and his family before they took him away.

"How could you have done such a thing?" people asked Trocme afterwards. *Imagine, how outrageous, sitting down to eat a meal with those who were about to cart you off to be punished and perhaps even killed! Why did you do it, Andre?* To which Pastor Trocme responded by saying something along the lines of, "Because it was time to eat and we were all hungry."

This evening, you and I and Christians across the globe gather to eat and to do something outrageous. For we, too, are hungry. Hungry for a world in which evil does not always beget more evil. Hungry for a world in which leaders choose the path of service rather than of domination. Hungry for a world in which love really is stronger than death.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus tells his disciples in this evening's gospel reading. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." What is new about this commandment, of course, is not Jesus' commandment to love but, rather, his commandment to love *as I have loved you*. And how is it that Jesus loves? Well, based on the Gospel accounts, Jesus loves in some pretty illogical, ill advised, outrageous ways. Breaking bread with notorious sinners, hanging out with lepers, healing on the Sabbath, speaking truth to power. And then in tonight's gospel, taking the role of a servant, debasing himself by washing his disciples' feet— not, notably, just the feet of the "good" disciples, but even the feet of the disciple who will betray him and the disciple who is, well, just plain clueless. We may be tempted in this evening's gospel to mock Peter for his response when Jesus brings out the jugs of water and announces his intent —*Lord, you will never wash my feet*—we may be tempted to mock Peter, but I actually think he deserves some credit for recognizing how crazy this whole Jesus movement really is. How risky and unreasonable, how off the charts bonkers it has become.

And yet Jesus' sort of crazy is the sort of crazy that saves—which is surely why we've all gathered here tonight. It is the sort of crazy that sets people free—free from the places where we humans usually feel trapped. When faced with the inevitable pains and sorrows and betrayals of life, Jesus' outrageousness tells us, we do not have to lash out. We do not have to become bitter. Neither do we have to give in or give up. When confronted with rising rates of crime, addiction, and gun violence in our society, instead of resorting either to cynical

inaction (*Why bother working for something better since things will never change?*) or retribution (*Those who live by the sword will die by the sword*)—when faced with problems to which there seem to be no solutions, rather than resorting to cynical inaction or violent retribution, Jesus shows us that it is possible to make another choice—the choice to love. The choice to treat others better than perhaps they—or we—deserve.

The late Quaker theologian Parker Palmer calls this choice—the choice to love even in the face of evil and hatred—Parker Palmer calls this choice “Jesus’ Third Way.” Presiding Bishop Michael Curry refers to it simply as the “Way of Love.” In his rather pithy book *If God is Love, Don’t be a Jerk*, John Pavlovitz speaks of it as “loving beyond our capabilities.”^[2] The author of this evening’s gospel describes it as Jesus “lov[ing] his own to the end.” St. Paul sums it up by noting that “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

However we describe it, whatever we call it, my guess is we generally know Jesus’ love when we see it. We know it in the bare cross that will be processed through this nave tomorrow. We know it in the hands that in just a few moments will hold our yucky feet as tenderly as our mothers once did when we were babies.

We know it in the familiar yet mysterious words of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, “This is my body given for you”—given for you, you half-hearted follower who often falls asleep when I’ve needed you to stay awake, who runs at the first hint of danger, who obeys my teachings mostly when it’s convenient, who has sold me out to make a lousy buck or two. This is my body given for you, even you, especially you, all of you.

Liturgy, someone once said, is “doing the world the way the world was meant to be done.”^[3] Liturgy is doing the world the way the world was meant to be done. And so we gather this evening to do just that. In a world obsessed with the spectacular and ostentatious, we gather to sup with One who comes to us in ordinary and humble vessels. In a world fixated on youth and beauty, we gather to lavish care on the old, rough, calloused parts of one another. In a world where exclusion is the norm, we welcome all to God’s table. In a world where division and hatred so often seem to carry the day, we sing songs of unity and reconciliation. Which is all pretty crazy when you come to think about it. But we can do it, we can love outrageously, because we have been loved outrageously ourselves. Such are the gifts of God for the people of God. Therefore let us keep the feast. Amen.

^[1] Hallie, Philip. *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There.* Harper Perennial, 1979.

^[2] Pavlovitz, John. *If God is Love, Don’t be a Jerk: Finding a Faith that Makes Us Better Humans.* Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

^[3] I’m attributing this to the late Aidan Kavanaugh, OSB, former professor of liturgics at Yale Divinity School. I am certain I heard him say it on more than one occasion. It may appear somewhere in his seminal work, *On Liturgical Theology*, though I can’t find the exact reference.