

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## Darkness Meets Love

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

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John 13:20-35

[At the Last Supper, Jesus said,] <sup>20</sup> I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." <sup>21</sup> After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me." <sup>22</sup> His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. <sup>23</sup> One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. <sup>24</sup> Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." <sup>25</sup> Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" <sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. <sup>27</sup> As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, <sup>28</sup> but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. <sup>29</sup> Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. <sup>30</sup> As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. <sup>31</sup> When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup> "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Last Sunday I mentioned the seven different titles Jesus takes for himself in the Gospel of John. John emphasizes one more than the others in his gospel. Jesus says, **“I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.” (John 8:12)** Darkness hides the beauty of God’s creation at night. In the same way, humanity’s moral and spiritual darkness hides God’s own beauty and love from us. Jesus is God’s own light in human form. As John says in his first chapter, **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5 NRSV)** In today’s gospel reading, we see Jesus, the light of the world, confronted by the deepest darkness in this world. And in this darkness, Jesus shows us that his love for his disciples and our love for one another shine in the darkness, and the darkness won’t overcome his love.

Let’s review the setting. Jesus has just finished washing the feet of every one of his disciples, including Judas. In an act of supreme kindness, Jesus dips a piece of bread in the bowl they all share and hands it to Judas as token of special favor and attention. Judas is faced with a terrible decision: should he go through with the plans he’s made with Jesus’ enemies to betray him? He accepts the bread Jesus offers him. John tells us that **“As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.”** Judas makes his decision: he goes Satan’s way instead of Jesus’.

And then we’re told, **“As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.”** Darkness reigns over the earth as the Prince of Darkness himself plots the death of God’s own light. As the door closes behind Judas, Jesus says, **“Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him.”** Now? Now, when this cowardly turncoat is about to hand him over to a gruesome and humiliating death, this is when God is glorified? Yes! God is glorified and Jesus is glorified. We see God’s love shining through Jesus in this darkest of all dark hours in Jesus’ love and kindness in the very face of evil and betrayal.

Jesus is betrayed by Judas, who was supposed to be on his side to help him and support him. Jesus will be denied by Peter, who was supposed to be on his side to help him and support him. Jesus will soon be abandoned by all his disciples but John, all of whom were supposed to be on Jesus’ side to help him and support him. But this is the hour when Jesus’ love triumphs.

John introduces this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his gospel by telling us that **“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (John 13:1 NRSV)** He loved them—but how could he? How could he wash their feet, knowing that they would betray him, deny him, and abandon him? Because he knew they would. He didn’t expect anything else from them. John

tells us that Jesus prepared to wash these same disciples' feet, **“knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.” (John 13:3 NRSV)**

This passage shows us that Jesus knew three things. First, Jesus knew he couldn't depend on people. He had no illusions that the people who were supposed to be on his side to help him and support him would really do that when the pressure was on. In fact, he knew very specifically that they wouldn't.

Second, Jesus knew he could depend completely and utterly on God. He knew **“he had come from God and was going to God.”** God would never fail him or forsake him, even in death itself.

In other words, Jesus knew he had nothing to lose in this world, but everything to gain in the next. **“The Father had given all things into his hands.” (John 13:3 NRSV)** His love was from his Father, and he brought his disciples into his Father's love, even Judas. Judas alone chose to reject it and side with darkness.

And Jesus commands us, his disciples, **“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** This is an axiom, a commonplace of the Christian faith, but how do we love one another as Jesus loved us? First, by knowing that people will fail us and disappoint us, and that we will fail and disappoint them. We have to know people the way Jesus did. But we also have to know that we've come from God by the new birth in the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives us through his death on the cross for our sins. And we must know that we're going to God, who will never fail us or forsake us, in the worst times in this life or in death itself. In other words, because of Jesus' love for us, we have nothing to lose in this world, and everything to gain in the next. We can love boldly, extravagantly, and willingly, because we love with Jesus' own love, whose source is in the Father's love.

The Father's love in Jesus for the disciples took many different forms. Here are some ways we should love one another with Jesus' own love. First, he spent time with them. This may seem obvious, but I think we forget that we can't really love people we don't know, and we can't really know people until we spend time with them.

Second, Jesus prayed for his disciples. That means he thought about them, about their progress in their relationship with him, about their well-being, and how their character was being formed. We can't love people if we don't spend time with them and don't think about them and pray for them.

Third, Jesus served them. He did things for them: he washed their feet when none of them was willing to do the job. He helped their families: he healed Peter's mother-in-law, and related to the mother of James and John. He arranged for their Passovers together and graciously offered even Judas special kindness at the table.

Fourth, he prepared them and challenged them to bear fruit; that is, to make other people into disciples. He trained them and prayed for them and helped them and showed them how to do it.

And he modeled it all in this last supper with them. Knowing what was ahead for him, he calmly served and blessed and broke and attended to them. He bestowed on them his Father's own peace and love and kindness in the very act of being betrayed and double-crossed by them. He died for them so they could live in him by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he gave to them.

Jesus commanded us to love one another as he loved us. By this, he said, "**all men will know you are my disciples;**" that is, they'll know we're Jesus' disciples and no one else's. Why only Jesus'? Because only Jesus is God, came from God, and takes us to God. Only Jesus will never fail us or forsake us when everyone and everything in this world will betray our trust sooner or later. People will know we are Jesus disciples for better or for worse. For better, when they see Jesus' own love among us and are drawn and captivated by that undying love in the darkness of this world. And for worse, when they oppose and reject that love because they still trust in the betrayers of this world: self, and strength, and independence and autonomy.

God's love is perfectly shown forth in Jesus, and he gives it to us so that we can show it forth in our love for one another. Let us love one another boldly and extravagantly as Jesus loved us.

Let us pray.