

The Ultimate Act of Love

(John 18:1-19:42)

Homily delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Good Friday, April 19, 2019

In the name of one God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

They were gathered at the foot of the cross, the handful who had remained. Mary, his mother. His aunt. The other Marys, Magdalene and the one who was the mother of Clopas. Joseph of Arimathea, who had come for the body. Nicodemus, the Pharisee who once had visited Jesus in the dead of night, coming to him out of curiosity and leaving with far more. And the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Love.

Just last night, Jesus had been talking to his disciples about love ... about how God had loved him and he had loved them ... about how they must love one another as a sign to others of who they were. Now, he was dead, crucified between two thieves. The Messiah, the Son of God, the incarnate Word: hung on a cross between common criminals. On this afternoon of darkness, where was the love of which he had spoken? And where were those whom he had loved?

Peter, the steadfast disciple, the rock, had denied him. Judas, another of the 12 who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry, had betrayed him. Some of those who had been among the crowd celebrating the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem just a few days earlier may have even been raising their voices as part of the crowd calling for his death and crying for the release of Barabbas. Other than the handful gathered at the foot of the cross, there was no one. Even God ... the God whose voice had been heard not long before, a voice which some thought was thunder and others thought was an angel ... was utterly silent.

Loyalty to abandonment. Service to betrayal. Adulation to condemnation. Proclamation to silence.

Where was the love of which Jesus had spoken?

On that day, in that place of such unimaginable suffering and sorrow, the cross was surrounded by love. Love was there as Jesus entrusted his mother and his devoted disciple to each other's care, one for the other. Love was there in the tears of Mary Magdalene and the sorrow of Mary, mother of Clopas. Love was there in the efforts of Joseph, a secret but devoted disciple of Jesus, to secure the body in order that it would receive a careful, customary burial. Love was there in the actions of Nicodemus, who arrived to assist and to help with the removal and early anointing of the body.

Despite the silence, the **love of God was there** ... a love that would lead to a far more incredible moment than anyone could dream of or imagine taking place.

But the greatest sign of love of all was not waiting in the heavens. It was not gathered at the **foot** of the cross. No, the greatest sign of love had been seen – whether anyone realized it at the time or not – **on** the cross. One night before, he had humbled himself before his disciples, kneeling before them to wash their feet and demonstrate an act of service for others. And on this Friday afternoon, his act of being raised on the cross – of suffering death for our redemption – was the **ultimate act of service** for others.

This “new thing which was the end of the old but which will itself never become old, which can only be there and continue and shine out and have force and power as that which is new and eternal”¹ – dying for the sins of creation – was the ultimate act of love.

Love truly **was** there on that dark day, and love remained ... and in the days ahead, many would see that the story of this love was not yet finished.

Amen.

¹ Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Vol. 4, Part 1*, p. 281.