

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

Maundy Thursday

“God’s Treasured Children”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the best cartoon stories that Charles Schultz ever wrote was the one entitled, “The Little Red Headed Girl” or “I Love You Charlie Brown.” The story goes like this:

Charlie Brown was in love. Linus knew it because Charlie Brown wasn’t feeling very well lately. His stomach was upset; he was distracted; and Linus had seen Charlie looking over at the little red headed girl on the school bus one day. Even more important than that, one day Linus saw Charlie playing the daisy game. You know the daisy game: she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not.

Linus figured out what was going on, and so he approached Charlie and spoke to him bluntly: “You like the little red headed girl, don’t you Charlie?” Charlie was so upset. He was flabberghasted. He was embarrassed. Now another person knew that Charlie Brown was in love with a ... girl. Well, that same day, Charlie Brown went to school, and the teacher asked Charlie to come up in front of the whole class room and read his report to all the kids in the class. Charlie was upset by this; he was flustered, frustrated, frazzled and he fumbled his papers around to find his report. In his frustration, Charlie finally decided to read the first page, the top page, regardless of what it said.

Charlie read aloud: “Dear little red headed girl, do you like me? Yes or No. Charlie Brown.” O No. He read the wrong paper. The whole class laughed at him and there is nothing worse than having the whole class laugh at you. ... Well, the next day was the last day of school, and Charlie couldn’t go all summer long without knowing if the little red headed girl liked him. He HAD to know. It would be a long, long summer, if he didn’t know. What would he do?

Charlie made his plans. He would go early the next morning and get on the school bus and ask her directly if she liked him or not. He set his alarm clock early, so as not to miss the bus. It was four o’clock in the morning that the alarm went off and he felt like he had been run over by a herd of elephants. He got up, went to the bus stop by 4:30 in the morning and waited on a bench. While sitting on the bench, waiting for the bus, Charlie dozed and then fell fast asleep, only to be waken by the roar of the bus engine as the school bus pulled away from the bus stop. He saw the flash of the little red headed girls flaming red hair in the back window of the school bus as it pulled away. O no. Rats. He missed the bus. He failed again.

Charlie finally got to school, and he was in the same class with her all day. Suddenly, the day was over and he had one chance left. Only one. The ride home on the school bus. The school bell rang; he shot out of the school, and he stood there in line as the hordes of kids kept pushing and shoving and crowding around him, but he squeezed onto the bus. Where was the little red headed girl?

The bus started to pull away from the curb, and there was the little red headed girl there on that curb, waving to him or someone on the bus. O no. Failed again. Another crushing blow. In the confusion, he put his hands in his pocket, felt a piece of paper that shouldn't have been there. Somebody must have bumped into him and put that note in his jacket pocket. He opened the note. It said: "Dear Charlie, I like you Charlie Brown. The little red headed girl." Oh. Charlie was so happy. He jumped. He danced. He clicked his heels in the air, and he read the note again, "I like you Charlie Brown." Charlie felt so good inside, and now all summer he would be happy because he knew he was liked by that little red headed girl. After all, isn't that what life is all about?

It's such an adorable story – but it relates to us so well. The story is about Charlie Brown, but more importantly, we know that the story is about us, is about you and me. The story is an answer to an important question in life: am I liked? Am I loved? Do you like me? Do you love me? Does God love me?

On this Maundy Thursday we treasure these words of Jesus, where Jesus said: "A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another as I have loved you." Jesus demonstrated exactly what he was talking about by bending down and washing the disciples' feet. Think about those feet – walking around on smelly roads where many animals had also trod. No doubt they were dirty, filthy, covered with animal residue (eew.. you know what I mean by animal residue, right?!) and dirt and all kinds of grossness.

No wonder Peter's response was "you will never wash my feet." This was a job reserved for the lowest of the low classes of people. But Jesus insists that he must wash them. This is the way of his love.

Maundy Thursday's footwashing ritual is Jesus message to his disciples and to us. Jesus is preparing them for the time when he's no longer bodily present with them – for the time when they'll be doing ministry, carrying on his mission - filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. They'll be the ones, just as now, we are the ones – looking into the faces of sinners, bound in sin, wrapped in brokenness, longing to be whole people. And with them, we'll remember Jesus, with his wash basin and towel. We'll remember how he modeled for us the way to treat one another. It's like he's saying to us, "I'm sending you out into the world, to the people from whom I called you. Go out and love these people."

On this night, this Maundy Thursday, we're called to remember just what this kind of love can accomplish. Exodus tells us the night of the Passover, the night the Hebrew people were set free from miserable slavery in Egypt by God's intervention. The meal Jesus and his disciples ate on the night of footwashing was a Passover meal.

Eventually the church understood Jesus as the Passover Lamb whose blood protects us from death, who sets us free from the bondage of guilt and shame as we receive his forgiving love. After the disciples had seen the broken body of their Lord, with his blood spilled upon the cross, his words over the bread and wine that night took on meaning and significance. And within the story we heard from John's gospel is the reason this night is called "Maundy" Thursday. Maundy is an Old English word related to 'mandate' or 'command.' On Maundy Thursday we remember Jesus command to love one another in the way he has loved us.

This past week, read a quotation by the late Dr. Morris Niedenthal, who taught at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He said that Jesus accepted people just the way they were, but he never left people just the way they were because he loved them. Jesus always made them better. So often on Sunday morning, I say to a child at the communion rail as I bless them and trace the sign of the cross on their forehead, "Remember that God loves you today and always" But Jesus never leaves that person just the way they are.

Jesus always makes people better. Jesus never accepts people just the way we are and leaves us just the way we are and always makes us better. Or to put it another way, Jesus sees beneath the soil to the seeds of human possibility. Or, Jesus sees inside the seeds to the possibility of what we can become.

We are God's treasured children. In baptism we received this incredible gift of belonging – and ever since the day of your baptism, God has loved you with a love that never ends.

That kind of love has the power to change the world. That kind of love can make broken people whole again. That kind of love can move mountains. That kind of love is what each and every one of us here needs – and it is the kind of love that overflows out of our lives so that we can share this love with the world. This kind of love makes a huge difference in our lives and in the lives of people around us.

Do you know the length of longest sermon that was ever preached? The Guinness Book of World Records keeps records of everything, including for the length of the longest sermon ever preached. How long was that sermon? 53 hours and 18 minutes, by a pastor in Florida. Can you even imagine? But there is another world record. What was the shortest sermon ever preached? It was by Rev. John Albrecht, an Episcopalian priest, from Lake Orion, Michigan, and he spoke the shortest sermon ever given on record. He uttered one word, Love. And sat down. That was it. No more. Some parishioners said that it was the best sermon he ever gave.

We remember this night who we are. We are forgiven people. God's treasured children. Children who are set free from guilt, set free from shame. We are the people Jesus loves. Set free in his love, we no longer have to wonder about what to do. We have a mandate: to love and serve one another, just as Christ loves and serves us. May we answer his call this night, to go out into the world, renewed in His strong Spirit. May the love of God in Christ our Savior, fill us and overflow in acts of generosity to others. May our lives reveal to others the gift of God's amazing, overwhelming love.

Thanks be to God. Amen