

## **Maundy Thursday in Memory of Pastor Ed Sermon on April 18, 2019**

For obvious reasons, I would like to dedicate tonight's service and sermon to the memory of Pastor Ed Neiderhiser, a person who was loved far beyond his family and far beyond the walls of this church. Allow me to first ask an uncouth question to a person no longer among us: "What got into you Ed, to suffer a heart attack during Holy Week? Ed, as a pastor should have known better!!!" Knowing him, he is probably grinning straight at me and the biblical scholar in him is busy pointing out that that's what Jesus' disciples complained about as well on that day of the so-called Last Supper: "Jesus, you are a Rabbi, why do you have to talk about death tonight, during this wonderful Passover meal? Why do you have to die at this sacred time? It's not kosher!" Well, you see, we are here tonight at the intersection of the Jewish and Christian religions, at the intersection of life and death, in God's time, in God's hands.

The timing didn't seem quite right back then, people gathering all around Jerusalem to commemorate God's saving acts as recoded in the Book of Exodus. We sometimes picture only the disciples gathering for the Last Supper, as if they had planned a private reception at the William Penn Inn. In fact, what we need to picture is people all over the city coming together, gathering for Passover, eating together, remembering together, singing and praying together - and having a few glasses of wine. It was Passover. In the end, it turned out that Jesus' timing was not so bad. Today, Christians sing "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the World," as part of the communion liturgy, weaving all of us into the same Passover narrative from Exodus 12, the passage we heard earlier, identifying Jesus as the lamb slain to set us free, not from Egyptians but from the bondage of sin, from our own limitations, from our lack of faith and from everything that burdens us, including the heaviness felt from the loss of a loved one.

Of course, the heaviness is very much there, for many of us. One thing that we, a grieving church community, have in common with the Apostles during Holy Week this year is this: we are sad about the loss of one of our leaders; we are in disbelief; we are still trying to accept this. It still seems unreal. Tuesday morning was as beautiful a morning as any and then came a big shock, not only for Ed's wife Sally and their entire family, but also for so many people in and around St. Peter's. Some of the newer people in our community may not know that Pastor Ed actually served here as pastor for a number of years before he became a chaplain at Graterford Prison. He baptized children in this church. He married couples in this sanctuary. He buried people in this parish. He always lived in town. And he always played in and around town. He was always just simply around, his trumpet never far away. He was a human landmark in North Wales. So, this loss is felt very deeply. It's a community loss. It's bigger than St. Peter's.

Pastor Ed was the quintessential community person, always involved in groups, from music, to community boards to chaplaincy groups to neighborhood initiatives. That's part

of the reason I wanted to dedicate this service to him. After all, the Maundy Thursday service is about community, a new sense of community. As Jesus faces his fate, he encourages his disciples to live a life of community: "Love one another as I have loved you," he challenged them. It is a mandate to the entire church to this day. And whenever we doubt what we're doing, we should ask ourselves first: are we practicing this mandate? Are we embracing this new sense of community?

"Help one another," Jesus urged his disciples. Well, he didn't say exactly those words but he showed it in the washing of his disciples' feet. "Accept one another." He didn't say that either, but he also didn't kick out Judas who wound up betraying him. Jesus knew that his followers would be overwhelmed with sorrow, blinded by grief, disorientated by the loss of an important pillar in their lives. Jesus knew the emotional stakes of death. And yet, he was the one who comforted them and served them, almost right up to the last minute of his life. Even in death. And the biggest thing he asked them when he gave them this mandate to love one another is essentially this: become a new kind of community! Stand with each other during times of grief; stand with each other during times of controversy; share with each other your joys and your sorrows, your insights and your struggles. The Christian community is as good as our relationships are Christ-like, and it does not nearly depend as much on the correctness of our belief systems. I think that's what Jesus tried to instill in his followers on that last night. "Love one another, as I have loved you."

At the end of tonight's service, we'll strip the altar of all its religious symbols and decorations. It's one of the traditions of Holy week, symbolizing the barrenness felt in the wake of Jesus' death. And of course, those among us who have experienced grief, know well that feeling of emptiness and barrenness aching deep in your soul when you mourn the loss of a loved one and you wake up day after day without this person and you can feel the emotional pain almost physically. You just know that your life will be in some way re-defined but you don't quite know yet how that can happen and you are still trying to hold on to what you knew so well. I would like to encourage all of us to think about these grieving times when members of our confirmation class will strip the altar toward the end of tonight's service. Each item taken from the altar is to me a visible sign of hope, not defeat, of faith, not depression. Why? Because it is a spiritual truth that every renewal of our soul must go through some time of emptiness; every new form of life must go through some form of death. It is hard to accept, but it is true. It is part of the path and pilgrimage to Easter. It is part of the journey that leads to something new and beautiful. It is part of the faith preached by a certain Pastor Ed Neiderhiser for the last 50 or so years. It is a faith that allows us to observe Holy Week at this difficult time.

Amen.