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“As I Have Loved You” (Maundy Thursday)

Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

There have been some wonderfully touching stories told of pets, particularly dogs, who have mourned the loss of their masters and whose lives have been clearly and seriously affected by that loss. The most famous, of course, is Greyfriars Bobby, the Scottish terrier who, after his master's death, went to his master's grave in Edinburgh each morning, rain or shine, and then returned home each evening, a watch that he kept for several years. His loyalty has been recognized by his own monument in that cemetery. It is because of that sort of loyalty, the sort we would want in our human friends, that dogs are called man's best friend. That is why we like them, and that is why we keep them. Yet, veterinarians in frank moments will tell us that there is a limit to this loyalty. Dogs certainly do miss us if we are gone, but, if they are hungry, the day after we leave, if someone gives them a can of Alpo they may well forget we ever walked the earth. I can attest to this. My German Shepherd is a deeply devoted dog and misses me when I am gone from the house too much. Yet, on the other hand, I have to realize that I got him from a SAVE shelter when he was about three years old, and in the seven years I have owned him, he has spent, as far as I can tell, no time whatsoever moping over the loss of his previous family. After showing our other, older dog who was the alpha male he moved in without a hitch. Perhaps he is mad at his former family, but I doubt it as he rarely is filled with resentment. If I am honest, I have to realize that I have no reason to think that I am special in his life in a way that his previous family was not.

Now part of the reason that dogs can transfer their loyalty so easily is because for dogs

there is no such thing as the meaning of life. Dogs like romping and chasing balls; dogs can be happy or sad. Dogs can be sensitive to what people are going through, and dogs can, to a degree, think. But dogs do not think about the meaning of life. They do not read books about it, nor do they worry whether they have missed out on it or not. Thus when someone to whom they are devoted dies, whatever loss they may feel, it is not a loss of the meaning of life or of the world. Their inner lives are not devastated in the ways that ours often are when we suffer loss. They are not devastated for the simple reason that dogs don't really have inner lives. Dogs are loyal, dogs can be smart, but whatever else they are, dogs are not deep.

Now the reason I bring this up is, of course, because, by contrast, it allows us to see something of what it means for *us*, who do have inner lives, to suffer loss, a loss, say, such as the one that loomed large for Jesus' disciples the night of the last supper, the night in which he was betrayed. For us to lose someone dear is not simply to lose a routine, or to lose the security of our next meal, although that can and does happen to people. But if and when it does, it simply seems to us pathetic that someone's life has been so reduced that he or would focus on those sorts of things on in loss. So the point here is that for human beings what is most devastating in loss is that the meaning of life itself can be lost. Because we do have inner lives that are bound up in significant ways with other people the whole world can and does change for us when we lose someone who is dear.

Now, we can fend off this loss of meaning of life. For example, one way that human beings have of fending off this loss of meaning is by keeping tokens of remembrance. People who have been married and have lost a partner frequently wear or carry the wedding ring that they gave to their spouse and that their spouse wore. Similarly, we keep books that once belonged to people we have loved and lost; we keep articles of clothing or mementos that

especially remind us of them; we consult photos we have of them; we especially tell ourselves and others stories about them. Little of this is just the self indulgence of pleasant memory; more significantly it is a way of keeping alive a whole world of meaning, meaning that is important for us in order to keep our own inner lives intact. It is a way of finding where in our hearts our loved ones continue to live, and of keeping our hearts alive by remembering them there.

This sort of memory is something that is also of significant religious importance. Much religious practice is actually based on memory. Religion bids us remember where we came from, who made us, and bids us also remember significant world shaking events and persons that have changed God's people forever. It bids us remember the words of our religion's founders who, we believe, have revealed to us God's truth. The Christian religion in particular bids us remember our Lord himself, who is the soul of our souls. And religion also usually has its special tokens of memory. In Christianity, these are what we call sacraments.

Understanding that we exercise this sort of deep memory in religion is a particularly important way of thinking about what the Lord's Supper means to the Christian faith. It helps us understand just what Jesus was doing on this night nearly two thousand years ago, when, after supper, he took bread, and gave thanks, and then broke it and said "take, eat, for this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." This supper is a token of memory that connects us to our Savior and ultimately to God the Father. It is a token of memory that keeps us connected to a whole world of meaning, and lies at the heart of our hearts.

That it does this is obvious in several ways. The Lord's Supper, of course, reminds us of that last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples. It is a memorial that Jesus told the disciples to make. It is also a token of memory of Christ's death on the cross, for as he himself tells us of the bread, "this is my body which broken for you," and of the wine, "this is my blood which is

shed for you.” Thus to participate in the Lord’s Supper is to hold onto a token of memory that connects us to a whole world of meaning, and that lies at the heart of our inner life, our religious inner life.

But it is also more than just a memory in this backward looking way. It is more than a memory of what took place once nearly two thousand years ago. As we say in the memorial acclamation of the communion liturgy: “Christ has died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will come again*.” What we celebrate here certainly remembers a past event, but it is also a present welcoming of the risen Christ into our midst who then gives his body and soul to us, and it is a foretaste of the messianic banquet which is in heaven, and to which God’s children, Christ’s sisters and brothers are all invited. This sacrament *is* more than a token of memory, it is by God’s grace, Christ’s very presence, body and soul, to us here. Christ promised to his disciples, and to us, that he would be with us always, even to the end of the age. He meant that, and in meaning it, he was not speaking hyperbolically, as if he were only present to us in the way that our loved ones remain present to our memory in stories, in photos, and in tokens. No, he meant he *really* would be present among us. He said elsewhere that wherever two or three were gathered in his name, that he would be there also. He is. And the way that he is present is in this memorial that he himself commanded us to make. He is present here by his own promise to be present.

So this meal in which we partake tonight is not simply our looking backwards. It is our partaking in Christ’s own gift to us of his presence. For any Christian to understand the truth of this sacrament is therefore for him or her to realize that in it we don’t just remember how Christ once upon a time died for us; rather, it is to realize that it is not too much to say that Christ died precisely in order that he might give us this sacrament so that he can continue to be present with

us and take us into his life. It is to realize that he gave us this sacrament by his death so that his people ever afterwards might be bound closely to him, and so that the world of meaning into which he, the light of the world and the light of all people, brings his people into might be something more than a fancy way of talking. He gave his life so that what happens here tonight, and what happens on every Sunday we celebrate the Lord's Supper, might happen. He gave his life so that we might have this sacrament, and by partaking in it, we might have life by becoming more and more like him because he is becoming more and more the center of our lives. He gave this sacrament so that we might regain God's image which we had lost, so that we might be made God's children.

For all of these reasons, this token of memory is unlike any other that we possess. For unlike any other token of memory that we hold onto so that we don't lose touch with a world of meaning which we learned in the past through people that are no longer with us, this token of memory actually initiates us into a world of meaning. It does not simply cast our eyes backwards; it also thrusts us forward. It brings the past into the present and into the future. This sacrament is a token of memory that will change us; all other tokens of memory are, in a way, meant to keep things from changing.

And it is for this reason therefore that this token of memory is essential for us to fulfill the new commandment that Jesus gave his disciples at the Last Supper. There he told them "to love one another, even as I have loved you." What that means is shown, of course, in all that he did for them in the years that they wandered the Palestinian countryside together, and it is put forth quite explicitly in all that he taught them during that time. What that means is especially brought home to them when after supper he washed their feet, telling them that they are to be servants to each other. But what it above all means, how far it goes, is seen in the sacrament of

the Lord's Supper. For that sacrament means that they are in their love for others, especially those of the Christian community, to go so far as death itself to give life to others. This life-giving sacrament comes from Christ's death; it comes from the blood that poured from his side when the soldier's spear pierced it. Many medieval paintings emphasize this when they portray an angel at Christ's side while he hangs on the cross, catching his blood in a chalice. But if this sacrament does come from his death, it is something that gives us life, new life. It thrusts us into the future. How? By giving us the same sort of love, by giving us the grace so that our love for others helps thrust them into the new thing God is doing, too. Let us therefore fulfill Christ's new commandment by partaking of this sacrament, and by thus being a part of Christ's life, and a part of his love, even going so far by the love it gives to us as to giving our lives for others.