

We are knit together with love as the body of Christ, a force of strength for our lives and a gift that Jesus gives us on this night.

Jesus anticipates how the lives of his close friends, family and followers will be affected by his impending death and he uses the context of dinner together to help prepare them for the distressing events that are approaching.

Jesus knows that his community is fractured already, little arguments here and there about who is the greatest for example. He knows that harm will be done to this budding, fragile community through the violent events that are beginning to unfold, and he wants to equip them for survival. Lots could happen. The violence could beget violence, the loss of trust amongst the members could effectually dissolve the community, and fear could drive them away from one another so that there will be no community left to hold one another, to grieve his loss, and to continue to spread the Gospel. Jesus prepares them for all that is about to happen with the most powerful weapon he has, the weapon of love.

How Jesus responds to fearful events tells us a lot about the kind of love that he gives his community, and why the community he formed 2000 years ago remains even today, here in this place and all around the world.

Take his relationship with Judas. Judas has been entrusted with the management of the money by Jesus and reclines next to Jesus in a position of honor at dinner, so Judas is obviously close to Jesus and trusted by Jesus. But Jesus knows who is about to betray him, and the knowledge troubles him deeply, yet he shares a meal with Judas rather than expelling him from the group.

And then there's Peter. Jesus knows that Peter will deny knowing him before sunrise the next day because he is afraid of getting caught up in the arrest and trial that Jesus is facing. Jesus knows that Peter will deny his friendship and love for him because of fear, and yet he washes his feet. The first to have his feet washed.

It would be so human to use Judas as an example of evil or use Peter as an example of cowardice. Or even to admonish the other disciples whom he surely understands will scatter and abandon him. But Jesus doesn't do that. Who among us would not cancel a dinner party if we knew that our closest friends and allies were about to put us in such danger?

Instead, in the midst of the little side conversations, the jockeying for power and position, the ongoing debate about who is the best of the disciples, and the betrayal that lurks beneath the surface, Jesus is found on his hands and knees offering to wash the feet of them all. Love is offering loving service to the least lovable.

Jesus loves his community through all of the hurt – the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, and the scattering of everyone else when he may have needed them most – he loves them through it all, tenderly calling them “little children.”

His response to the knowledge of all that is to happen is to “love them to the end.” The kind of love that Jesus shows is not simplistic. It is risky. It is sacrificial. It also creates a community of people who know forgiveness and grace.

Jesus' parting words to his disciples don't focus on blame for their past and

upcoming failures. He models for us the ability to keep our arms wide open in welcome even for those who disappoint us deeply with all of their broken humanity. He models for us the importance of keeping our arms wide open for ourselves, even when we aren't our best selves.

His new commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" is consonant with what Jesus has already taught them and how he has lived his life, and it places an expectation on us to practice it in this new community that Jesus formed for us.

This commandment – to love one another as Jesus loves us – is the way that the world knows that there is something different about us. We are set apart by it.

The love that Jesus wants us to understand and to live, the love that he demonstrates in his life over and over again - is courageous and sacrificial. It is love that can find expression in our everyday lives – how we treat one another in our homes and in the stores, building up one another rather than tearing each other down; forgiving the ways in which we hurt one another; making sacrifices for one another and putting what's best for the other ahead of what may make us feel better in the moment; helping one another grow in our relationships with God through friendship; and nurturing this community that has been created by God through Jesus.

Life is beautiful and it can be difficult. At times we can be Judases and Peters, but love has been shown to us to carry us through whatever difficulties we face, and as a living example of the kind of love that we are to grow into so that we can offer it to others.

Whoever we are, wherever we are on our spiritual journey, God remains with us. We are forgiven; we are accepted; we are beloved.

This community of St. Clare's called together in love by Jesus is God's way of caring for us even in the difficult times. God provides. In creating a community with love at its center, Jesus is establishing a lasting foundation of nurture and support in God's name that we rely on today, regardless of what troubles us. Even in this dark week, and in this dark world, we can live with hope. God remains with us. Thanks be to God.

Amen.