

THE TIE THAT BINDS - LIFTED

Epiphany

Isaiah 40:26-31
John 13:1-5; 12-17

A Sermon Preached by Marcia McFee, MTh, PhD Liturgical Studies and Ethics
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Isaiah 40:26-31¹

Look up at the sky and consider:

Who created these?

The one who brings out their attendants one by one,
summoning each of them by name.

Because of God's great strength and mighty power,
not one is missing.

Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel,

"My way is hidden from the Lord;
my God ignores my predicament?"

Don't you know? Haven't you heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth

who doesn't grow tired or weary
—whose understanding is beyond human reach,
giving power to the tired
and reviving the exhausted.

Youths will become tired and weary,
young ones will certainly stumble;

but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength;
they will fly up on wings like eagles;

they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary.

***Musical Prayer:*²**

And God will raise you up on eagle's wings.

Bear you on the breath of time.

Make you to shine like the sun

And hold you in the palm of God's hand.

John 13:1-5; 12-17

Before the Festival of Passover, Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world and go to God. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully. Jesus and his disciples were sharing the evening meal. The devil had already provoked Judas,

¹ Common English Bible [*translation of the Holy Bible*], 2011 (adapted). By Common English Bible, accessed 3/16/2017 at <http://www.commonenglishbible.com>, accessed 3/16/2017.

² Excerpt from Michael Joncas (1979), "On Eagle's Wings" (adapted). © 1979, 1989, New Dawn Music, Oregon Catholic Press. Information accessed 3/16/2017: http://www.hymnary.org/tune/on_eagles_wings_joncas and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Eagle%27s_Wings.

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Simon Iscariot's son, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew God had given everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the table and took off his robes. Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing. ...

After he washed the disciples' feet, he put on his robes and returned to his place at the table. He said to them, "Do you know what I've done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you speak correctly, because I am. If I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do. I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them. Since you know these things, you will be happy if you do them.

Musical Prayer:³

*And I will raise you up on eagle's wings.
Bear you on the breath of time.
Make you to shine like the sun
And hold you in the palm of God's hand.*

Marcia McFee

Prayer:

Holy and Living God,
We give You thanks that You have brought us here this day.
Open us, open us, O God, to Your possibilities.
Give us an appetite for Your surprises and a willingness for Your mighty blessings.
– Amen.

Well, friends, if there is one thing that you remember from today, let it be this. Repeat after me, "God loves you." [*God loves you.*] And there is nothing you can do about that. [*And there is nothing you can do about that.*] Indeed, God loves us.

The Divine One is all about relationship – so much about relationship that God took human form and walked and talked and lived among us. That's where the ancient church got the practice of reading about Jesus, and the stories of Jesus in the midst of the community – rather than high and lifted up – in the midst of the community, because Jesus lived and walked and talked and healed and challenged the people.

So God loves us so much that God came in human form. But friends, there is nothing we have to do, to get earn, or deserve the love of God that we experience right here. Do you believe me? Oh ... I believe you.

There is nothing we have to do to get, earn, or deserve the love of God. We simply have to open to it.

That my friends is our first task in worship, is simply to *open* to the love of God that's already and always here in the body, the body of Christ, whenever we gather. Our first task is simply to open

³ Ibid.

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ourselves to the love of God, to learn who God loves and how God loves, and to go and do likewise in the world.

You know being a good Christian doesn't start with simply doing good. It starts with loving God. Loving God. And then hearing the voice of God in our gathering say, "Do you feel this love and grace, this kind of being in the right relationship? Do you feel this community to such an extent that you are *compelled* to go out and live it beyond these walls?"

My PhD is in worship and ethics. And sometimes people say "Huh? Worship and ethics? What is ... What ... How does that go together?" Well friends, I believe that what we do in our worship actually matters for who we are becoming outside these walls. We come in here and we try on for size love and hope and reconciliation and forgiveness ... and letting go, and reaching out. We come in here, we try it on for size, so that when we are in the world it comes **snap** naturally. Our worship forms and shapes us. The question is: into what are we being formed? Are we being formed as passive disciples who believe that in worship it's something that the professionals up here do? Or do we understand that it's something that we all do? It's one of the reasons why right away I love disorienting us, making us look – and watch that Light of Christ come into our midst because it's not just what happens up here. It's what happens out there. Are you with me?

I've been here this weekend working with your worship staff, your Creative Arts Council, your Worship and Music Board. All of these people who have *passion* about what you do on Sunday morning because they also believe that what we do on Sunday morning matters for who we are in the world. We've been talking about the details and flow in preparation and how we can enhance what you already do so well. I'm not here to tell you that you should be doing something extremely different than what you're doing, but take what you're doing deeper and higher.

Yesterday in my workshop I put this up. This photo is one of the attributes I think that worship is.⁴



And worship *is* an invitation to soar, to take off from our normal everyday planes of existence and see from a different perspective, to see our lives in just a little bit different way, to be lifted. You can feel the wind beneath his wings, right? Like that beautiful Scripture from Isaiah that we heard just so beautifully read for us, a time when the exiled people needed to hear this message, "I will lift you up." We come here to try on for size what it means to *be* lifted, so that we might, as disciples, go and lift others as well.

But one of the things I said about this picture is that sometimes we get so enamored with the nice neat, little, pile that we've created, you know, that we took all that time to create, that we never **whew** take off. We need all that preparation, all the ... And .. And these ... Do you know how much time these people spend putting a Sunday morning together? Do you know how much that takes? It takes a long time to make that pile! But the pile is only there so that in the moment we can, together as a body, "*whew*" take off and soar with wings like eagles.

⁴ (Photo projected onto back wall. Photo provided by Marcia McFee 3/30/2017.)

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So worship is not a spectator sport, my friends. It's not something that's done to us or for us. It's not something that we consume. So here's a question for you: Do we believe that we come here to consume something? Or to co-create something? If we believe we come here to consume something, the question for evaluation is: do I like it? But if we come here to co-create something, the question is: did we get lift off? And did I help propel that – because I was part of it.?

You know, the mission of worship actually is not what we like and don't like. Newsflash! ... Newsflash! The mission of worship actually is to build up the body of Christ for its work in the world through encounter with the Holy Living God, the God that lifts us up and makes us soar like wings on eagles, to feel that – and then to go and do likewise. That's our mission of worship to build up the body of Christ for its work in the world. But friends, the body of Christ *is* diverse.

You know the Bible says where two or three are gathered there *will* be diversity. – Actually it *doesn't* say that. But I think that's why in that verse Jesus said he would be with us. It's because whenever we get together about anything, we all have opinions about ... about it. We all have diverse ways of reacting to it, diverse ways of getting into it.

So I want to ... I want to guarantee you and – you probably know this already – but I'm going to guarantee that at any one point in worship we're to be doing something, and somebody's going to be soaring. Somebody's spirit is just going to be “*Haah! Shpeeyoo!*” as can be . . . and another person is gonna be **uh** not so much. Right? But here's the thing, what's good for one is good for the whole – if we decide to celebrate in that moment that someone is being lifted, *and* we decide to lift in that moment, even if we're the ones with our feet on the ground.

Does this make sense? It's called a culture of radical hospitality. A culture of radical hospitality! – and I'm guessing from your logo that that's something that's important to you.

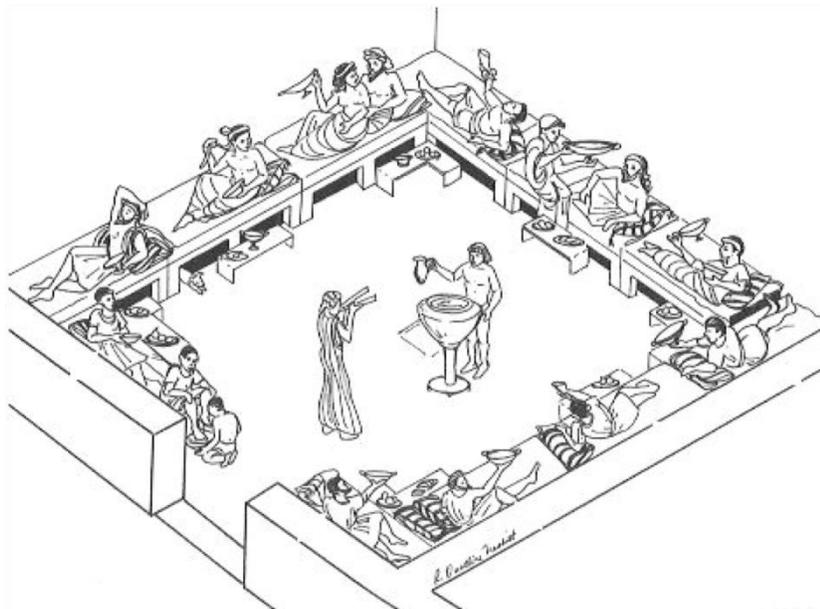
A culture of radical hospitality: You know we talk a good game about hospitality to those outside our walls. And then sometimes ... You know, I have been doing this consulting thing for over 20 years. I've seen it all. And churches don't usually invite me when **everything** is going right. Sometimes there's a little bit of a rough edge. That happens to all churches. We want to just fine-tune what were doing. But sometimes what we need to remember IS our call to radical hospitality – and the stranger among us might be the one who has been sitting next to us in worship for the last 20 years, but we resonate with different things. Extending my hand in hospitality at that moment, where it's lifting up that brother or sister.

You know Jesus was our – and is – our model for radical hospitality. He continually broke the norms of his day, the social norms – especially around table practice, around the whole banquet tradition, actually. Jesus was part of a Jewish banquet tradition that was really emulating in some ways, or taking its cues from, the Greco-Roman banquet tradition of that time. Dennis Smith wrote this awesome book called *From Symposium to Eucharist* really talking about the banquet tradition in Jesus' time.⁵ And, and Smith reminds us – this is a drawing from his book – that when Jesus gathered

⁵ Dennis E. Smith (2003). *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World*. Fortress Press.

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around the table with his disciples it wasn't like Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper." They weren't all around like a *table* table. They were probably in something like this configuration.⁶ And there was a real social pecking order of the day around these banquet traditions. I mean, you didn't just invite any old body, right? You invited those who were of your social stature and, even within those of your



social stature, there was a pecking order around this. Why is it that the disciples kept saying, "Jesus, who's going to be at your right hand?" – because, my friends, the place of honor is down here at the bottom. And then it went around in decreasing order in terms of the host: who is the honored guest's right hand? – and thus, and thus, and thus around the circle until we get to even the last one in the pecking order there who is having his feet washed by the servant.

And guess what Jesus did? He got up and he closed the circle. And he

closed the circle because he *became* the servant. He lifted up everyone in that room. Everyone he crossed paths with, he lifted them up by extending a hand that said "I am no better than you, and you are no better than me." "Servants are no better than their masters, and masters are no better than their servants." He lifted people up, and he broke social norms to do it.

Are we going to be disciples of Jesus Christ lifting others up – especially those not like us and breaking social order when necessary in order to do it? That's a real question. Will we? Yes. I believe that we will – and that we must.

So, this whole idea of reaching out, that whole idea of leaving that space in the circle extending the hand . . .

Some of you may have heard of theologian Brian McLaren. And I was just with Brian this last week; we were at a conference called "The Convergence Music Project", which is an awesome thing. You'll be happy to know because it's a lot of people who want to make sure that the progressive church has songs to sing that are about justice. And so a whole lot of composers came together, and we talked about what that meant. And I was one keynote speaker. Brian McLaren was another.

What I didn't know about Brian is that he is a composer, actually, a composer of music. And he happened to have this this song. It's called "Clenching Fist and Open Hand." (And, really, I wrote my sermon before I found this song.) That's the way the spirit works sometimes, right?

⁶ Photo from Dennis E. Smith, Op.Cit. (Photo projected onto back wall, provided by Marcia McFee 3/30/2017.)

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Sometimes you wonder whether God really does exist
and if God's way is of the open hand or clenching fist.
And while some preachers argue over doctrines and demands,
their followers are making clenching fists of open hands.
So is religion killing us is it tearing us apart?
Does it open space to reconcile or shrink the heart?
Two paths lie before us, one constricts and one expands.
One is the way of clenching fist the other, open hands.
What we hold in mind and heart flows down through the wrist
and is expressed in open hand or in a clenching fist.
And so we build on solid rock or else unstable sand;
and so we live by clenching fist or by the open hand.
If we fight and fear and hate our conflicts will persist
until we trust the open hand more than the clenching fist.
In church and mosque and synagogue, how many understand
the Living God as the Loving God of the open hand? ⁷

My friends what we do in worship matters for who we are becoming outside these walls. The way that we are together as community matters because we are trying on for size the way that we are in the world. Everything in our worship helps to practice us into the sorts of persons who go and do likewise. Something as simple as passing the peace every week. You may think, "Ah, why is it that we greet each other in the middle of worship? We greeted each other when we came in." But in that moment we ritualize: we try on for size what it means to reach out toward each other, even perhaps when we don't feel like it. Or it feels a little bit risky, or we're not sure. We practice ourselves into who we are becoming outside these walls. So I'm going to leave you with this image of how the world needs us to be a church that lifts one another, that opens hands in order to bring each other up, to learn who God loves, and how God loves, and to go into the world and do that.

What we do in our worship matters for who we are becoming.

Background music to video⁸

In this heart lies for you
A lark born only for you
Who sings only for you ...

Reading⁹

Hello my name is Karim and I am an
Arab American. Like many people who are Black,
Brown, women, LGBTQIA, Latinx, Muslim, Jewish,
immigrants and other , I am very scared. We are anxious and
uneasy in our own country, and it's difficult to see what lies ahead

⁷ Brian McLaren, 6/4/2009. Reference <https://brianmclaren.net/open-hand-clenched-fist/>, accessed 3/16/2017.

⁸ Karim Sulayman, tenor, singing song and music "In This Heart" (from album "Universal Mother", 1994) by Sinéad O'Connor, all in video by Meredith Kaufman Younger, www.mdkproductions.com.

⁹ "Karim Sulayman – "I Trust you", sign carried on Central Park West, NYC, NY, 11/19/2016. (Adapted.) One source is <http://vimeo.com/193125533>, Note: the sign also references #youaresafewithme and #safetyinnumbers.

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for our own country [US]. But I have HOPE that I am safe with you.
Together we can build community of caring rather than one
of fear. You can trust me to care for you no matter
who you are, what you look like or where you are from.
. . . Will you shake my hand and/or
HUG me and/or take a picture with me
. . . as a sign that I trust you. – Hashtag [#] we are better together.

...

My love
My love
My love

I am waiting for you
For only to adore you
My heart is for you.
My love
My love
My love

This is my grief for you
For only the loss of you
The hurting of you
My love
My love
My love.

There are rays from the weather
Soon these tears will have cried
All loneliness have died.
My love
My love
My love.

I will have you with me
In my arms only
For you are only.
My love
My love
My love

And all God's people say Amen.

UCUCC: MMcF

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/03/02/2017