

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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V Easter, John 13:31-35

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning, Trinity Church!

As the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel begins, Jesus realizes his hour draws near, and the Evangelist offers us readers the reassurance that Jesus, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."ⁱ As we heard these same events narrated on Maundy Thursday, Jesus stands from the supper table, ties a towel around himself, and washes his disciples' feet. Jesus then retakes his seat and explains to his friends, "if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."ⁱⁱ He then prophecies of his betrayal before encouraging his friends with a renewed purpose for their life together: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."ⁱⁱⁱ

As Jesus' arrest approaches, then, his disciples begin to look ahead to the possibility of a life *without* him. In response, Jesus instead invites his friends to reflect on their time *with* him and to trust in the power of *love*: his love for them, and their love for him. By "word and action,"^{iv} Jesus asks them to believe the paradoxical: that his execution will not end in death, but in life ... and, likewise, that their grief will not portend despair, but hope. Moreover, Jesus proposes the means of these transfigurations will be the very vulnerability that opens them to sorrow: *love* ... somehow, *love* will transform death into life ... somehow, *love* will transform despair into hope ... how can this be?

Well, the melancholy Dane, our nineteenth-century, Existentialist friend, Soren Kierkegaard, proposes that the truest faith **commands a belief in the contradictory** and **demand a fidelity to the absurd**.^v To illustrate his claim, he describes two knights: the "knight of infinite resignation," and "the knight of faith." Of the former, he imagines "A [peasant] youth [who] falls in love with a princess and the whole content of his life consists in this love, and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized, cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality."^{vi} Those who know this boy discourage his daydream. Kierkegaard calls these discouragers "slaves of misery, frogs in the swamp of life."^{vii} They croak their protests: "Such a love is foolishness; the ... brewer's widow is just as good and a sound match[, at that]."^{viii}

However, the knight of infinite resignation ... does not give up the love, not for all the world's glory," and certainly not for the brewer's widow.^{ix} Facing the impossible, the knight of infinite resignation demonstrates a strength of focus that allows him to pour his whole being into a "single wish."^x Unlike "those financiers who invest their capital in all sorts of securities in order to gain on the one when they lose on the other," the knight of infinite resignation concentrates his being "into [this single] act of consciousness."^{xi}

Kierkegaard proposes this knight's "love for [the] princess [becomes] for him the expression of an *eternal* love, assume[s] a religious character, [and transfigures] into a love of the eternal being" itself, a movement which assures that he will never realize the love in life.^{xii} That is, by transfiguring his finite love into an infinite devotion, he hedges: he ensures that no one can take this precious love from him, but he does so at the cost of ensuring that the love will not be realized in this life. Indeed, upon setting his faith's fulfillment beyond his mortal existence, "He pays no further finite attention to what the princess does, and precisely this proves that he has made the movement infinitely."^{xiii}

We might describe this as a Good Friday faith, of one who faithfully walks with Jesus to the cross and will not leave his side, despite knowing with certainty that their friend and brother, teacher and mentor, will die on Calvary, and their hopes along with him. See, though they go to the cross, they go *believing that their cause is lost* – they expect fulfillment of God's hopes will be fulfilled in a distant, great beyond, rather than in their lives.

In contrast to the Good Friday, knight of infinite resignation, Kierkegaard describes the Easter, "knight of faith," who, Kierkegaard admits, can look "just like a tax collector,"^{xiv} for "he belongs entirely to the world; no bourgeois philistine could belong to it more," Kierkegaard teases.^{xv} "He enjoys and takes part in everything, and whenever one sees him participating in something particular, it is carried out with a persistence that characterizes the worldly person whose heart is attached to such things. **He goes about his work.**"^{xvi}

In relation to his one love, the knight of faith "does exactly the same as the [knight of infinite resignation]," reconciling himself to the painful life of loving what is out of his reach, "But then the miracle occurs."^{xvii} He makes yet another movement more wonderful than anything, for he says: "I nevertheless believe [that my love will be fulfilled,] namely by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God everything is possible."^{xviii} See, the "knight of faith is clearly conscious of [finite impossibilities, but he believes that the contradictory can be realized – the paradox reconciled! –] and this he lays hold of by faith."^{xix} While the knight of infinite resignation's Good Friday constancy at the cross seems noble, this Easter knight of faith *believes in the impossible outcome*: that, in this life, Jesus' death *will* be transformed into life, and the disciples' grief *will* be transformed into hope.

Let us now make the turn to replace these knights with us of more modest stock, and, as Kierkegaard intends, let us set God's hope for the world as the single love for which we focus ourselves:

Friends, **so often are we noble and loyal knights of infinite resignation!** Facing a Church in decline and a world gone mad, we continue to be faithful in our Sunday attendance and committee membership – perhaps even in our stewardship and in our advocacy – but we set our hope in an *infinite* fulfillment. Indeed, with a finite realization of God's dream seeming a fantasy to us mired in the swamp of life – a peasant's love of a princess! – our fidelity becomes a personal salvation project, rather than an earnest effort to transform the world. So, counting the empty seats rather than the filled ones and humming softly “O, little town of Bethlehem,” our heart of hearts concede that the best days of our community are behind us, and we do not truly believe that love alone will be enough to turn the fortunes of Christendom.

Well, **what would it mean for us at Trinity Church, instead, to become knights of faith?** What is the impossible future God calls us to believe about ourselves, about our community, and about the city we serve ... *what is the impossible future God calls us to believe about ourselves, about our community, and about the city we serve?*

Friends, let us take that second and miraculous movement, and, beginning simply, let us believe as God believes *that our best days are ahead of us*. Moreover, may we be convicted that the means by which we will realize these hopes is nothing less than *love*, and, by our increasingly beloved community here, that we would inaugurate the very reign of God – in our time, in our world, for the good of the whole creation.

Kierkegaard expects that such knights of faith will be few, but I ask that you would be bold with me, and – together! – let us step forward and declare ourselves an order of believers, believing in the sufficiency of Jesus' commission: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”^{xx}

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.

ⁱ John 13:1.

ⁱⁱ John 13:14.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:33b-35.

^{iv} From “The Celebration of a New Ministry” in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 564. The same language may be found in the post-Communion prayers of the ordination rites for bishops, priests, and deacons: “... We pray that ____, may be to us an effective example in word and action, in love an patience, and in holiness of life.”

^v Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear And Trembling*. Edited by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, Cambridge Press, 2006. The story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), provides the setting for Kierkegaard's investigation of faith in *Fear And Trembling*. Given the complicated emotional force of that story, I stuck to Kierkegaard's theological claims as a lens for this morning's appointment, rather than reiterating the Genesis narrative.

^{vi} Kierkegaard, 34-35. The peasant-princess story has its heteronormative, patriarchal problems, but I offer it here with hope we can receive it in the context of Kierkegaard's day, and translate it into our own moment.

^{vii} Kierkegaard, 35.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Kierkegaard, 36.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Kierkegaard, 36-37.

^{xiii} Kierkegaard, 37.

^{xiv} Kierkegaard, 32. "Dear me! Is this the person, is it actually him? He looks just like a tax collector."

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Kierkegaard, 39.

^{xviii} Ibid.

^{xix} Kierkegaard, 37.

^{xx} John 13:33b-35.