

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

April 1, 2010
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14
 Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26
 John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Love at the core

Tonight's service brought to mind a movie that came out a good many years ago. I have only seen the trailer for the movie, not the movie itself, which received some almost comically awful reviews. The movie was named "The Core," and according to that ever-ready source of information, Wikipedia, in a poll of hundreds of scientists about bad science fiction films, "The Core" was voted the worst.¹ It may have been an impressively bad movie, but in the context of Holy Week I find the premise of the movie quite interesting. The idea behind the film is that the hot liquid center of the earth has stopped spinning, and the only way to save the planet from total destruction is for someone to go down there and jumpstart the core by exploding some nuclear bombs. The science may be out to lunch, but isn't that premise interesting? Here's what it's saying: there is a problem at the center of things and the only way to solve it is to bring in massive weapons and blow something up. It's a pretty satisfying fantasy. If something deep down is wrong, we will grab some weapons, unleash a few bombs, and wham-o! Problem solved. We will have saved the day, saved the world.

Generally I like action movies, but this Hollywood flick is delivering more than entertainment. It is delivering a basic worldview, one that is familiar to everyone in this room. According to this paradigm, our deepest problems can be solved by force. Whatever is ailing us, or the world, can only be fixed by violence. Domination, intimidation, fear – these are the weapons we must use on a daily basis if we want any kind of lasting security or peace. And when push comes to shove, we're gonna haul out our arsenal of weapons and let 'em fly.

This paradigm is a temptation for everyone holding power and everyone seeking power, whether they are Iraqi or American, Russian or Chinese. What can be played out on a large scale by nation-states and terrorist groups, by militias and tribal armies, can also be played out by individuals. I know for myself what it is like to jockey for position and to look out for number one. There are so many ways to explode our own little bombs – by name-dropping, bullying, or boasting, by spreading gossip or by speaking harsh words of judgment and contempt. It's a dog-eat-dog world, right? That's the worldview we learn to call "realistic," and it is

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Core

reinforced every day. In a competitive marketplace, we are taught that the bottom line is money, power, fame, and individual success. We learn to look at each other with wary eyes. What can I get from you? How can you be useful to me? In the words of Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, we learn to suspect our neighbors as ourselves.²

Into this anxious and belligerent world comes the one who says, “I am among you as one who serves. My only weapon is love and my only desire is to set you free.” In Jesus, God comes among us as one who renounces worldly power and rejects the grasp for domination and control. Jesus offers a new paradigm and a new worldview: the only way to peace and security is to serve one another, to listen to each other, to make room for the stranger, and to reach out to the lost. The core of the world *cannot* be mended by violence. Force and fear will never save the world, much less save our souls. Only love can do that. Only love.

Now, more than ever, we must consider this second worldview and explore its possibilities, for none of the big problems we face today – from global warming to racism and poverty – none of them can be stopped by B-52s. Not even terrorism can be stopped by war, for terrorism is itself a method of warfare used by those with no other recourse. Some analysts even say that terrorists *want* to evoke a violent response. And the more violent we become, the more frightened we feel. As the Sufi poet Hafiz puts it, “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I’d like to see you in better living conditions.”

Jesus comes to show us the way out of fear, to give us a path to fullness of life. What does he do? “During supper, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him” [John 13:2b-5]. It is a gesture of profound humility, the gesture of someone who seeks not to dominate but to serve, not to hoard power but to offer everything he has for the sake of others. Jesus refuses to react to our fearful situation with fear and force. Instead he offers a paradigm of cooperation and mutual service, and releases among us the unconditional love of God.

In a moment we will re-enact his gesture, as we come forward, take off our shoes, and bend over to wash each other’s feet. It will be for many of us a vulnerable moment, a moment, perhaps, of feeling uncomfortably exposed. Perhaps

² Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, quoted by Rabbi Michael Lerner, “Spiritual Politics and the Post-Iraq Realities of Global Discourse,” from a talk given on 3/31/03 and excerpted in an email from the Tikkun Community.

Peter speaks for us all when he flinches and draws back. “Lord, are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.” It is hard to be vulnerable, even with people who love us. It is especially hard to be vulnerable in a power-hungry world where people elbow each other out of the way in their rush for domination and control. We long for unconditional love, but so often we draw back in shock, embarrassment, or suspicion when it is freely offered to us. How much safer to keep other people at a polite distance, to do our best not to need anyone and to go it alone! But that is what love is about: the willingness to lay aside our weapons and our shields, the willingness to disclose who we really are and to encounter each other with kindness and respect, the willingness to find a way to serve.

In a world so bewitched by the drug of force, so addicted to the thrill of domination, we stand tonight, as we do in every Eucharist, inside a different paradigm. Tonight we lift up the power of community, the power of service, the power of belonging to one another. Tonight we dare to say: *this* is what God is like. *This* is the power at the center of reality and at the center of our being: the power of love. Fear is not the only force at work in the world today,³ nor will fear have the last word.

Jesus gives himself to us tonight as we wash each other’s feet, and as we share in the bread and wine. Tomorrow he will give himself to us in his outpouring of love on the cross. “Take me,” says Jesus. “I am holding nothing back.” Will we accept his love? Will we follow where he leads? Which path, which paradigm, will we choose?

Here is another poem, this one by Michael Leunig:⁴

There are only two feelings. Love and fear.
 There are only two languages. Love and fear.
 There are only two activities. Love and fear.
 There are only two motives, two procedures,
 two frameworks, two results. Love and fear.
 Love and fear.

³ Slogan spotted several years ago on a United Methodist Church poster at the Amtrak train station in Stamford, Conn.

⁴ Michael Leunig, *A Common Prayer*