

I have loved you with an everlasting love. . .
I have called you, and you are mine. . .

Tonight, Jesus shows us one aspect of this everlasting love God has for us. . .

Throughout his ministry – Jesus was often criticized because of his bad table manners. . . the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, complained often and well that Jesus simply hung out with the wrong people at meals: “he eats with sinners, “ they said in disbelief. . .

For Jesus, eating with sinners was not a form of rebellion against the purity rules and regulations of Judaism –

It was just his inclusive sense of love and acceptance at work. He enjoyed the company of the poor and of outsiders – and wanted them to be included.

Once in response to the accusation that he was keeping bad company – Jesus told the story of a father who celebrated the return of his wayward son with a festive banquet. And when the older son stayed away because of jealousy – the father went to him to invite him to join the festivities: “for this son of mine was lost, is now found.” In a sense, the older son was just as lost as the younger one --- he just did not know it – and even if he did, would certainly never admit it.

Today, Holy Thursday, we celebrate the Eucharist in a special way. Jesus’ story of the father with two runaway sons is a story about Eucharist – about thanksgiving on getting back something which was lost.

The Eucharist is a welcome-home banquet of a God who remains in love with sons and daughter – even when they run away, ignore him, do their own thing, get woefully lost --- a God who still loves us even if we don’t know we are lost – or cannot admit it.

The accusation that Jesus “eats with sinners” was meant to discredit him. It was meant to show that he was NOT the Messiah – or, at best, a very strange Messiah.

But the accusation is actually an excellent way of defining Eucharist. In the Eucharist Jesus DOES eat with sinners. Instead of discrediting him, the accusation is the reason we are able to change and follow him more closely.

In the Eucharist – we are embraced by Jesus, our Messiah and friend – who actually ENJOYS our company.

In the Gospel story we just heard from St. John: Jesus shows just how much he loves and accepts us. . . .

While they were at supper, Jesus rose from the table. Taking a basin of water and a towel – he went to each of the disciples and washed their feet – the normal task of a lowly servant.

Although one disciple objected, and many more probably never had a clue as to what he was doing – all eyes were on him as he went from one to the other washing the dust off their feet.

And when Jesus had finished this lowly-servant task – he sat with them at table. The room was certainly silent. Then, looking at each of them, Jesus said: “If you want to be my follower – you must do as I have done.” He was saying that discipleship is NOT about lording power over people – it is about SERVICE – and not to the high and mighty – but to the lowly and needy. No one who follows Jesus can scramble for honors – except to be the servant of all.

Jesus' humble foot-washing proclaimed a revolution. It upset all the old ideas about how we are to look at God – and how God looks at us. Jesus, this kneeling, foot-washing, lowly servant – Messiah --- looks and acts like a very strange God.

To gain perspective on how much God loves us – we have to get down on the floor where Jesus knelt to see how God looks up at us. The God of the universe, the Lord of heaven and earth – looks up at us – and sees that we are very good – especially when we don't even know it! This is the extreme God goes – to love us.

I have loved you, with an everlasting love. . .
Even IF we add infidelity to infidelity. . . Even IF we are dead in our transgressions. . . Even IF a mother could forget her child --- I have called you, and you are mine.

Yes, indeed, this is a strange God we follow – a God who lavishes --- lavishes – such extravagant love on each of us. A God who gets down on your knees God who does anything he needs to – so as to gain our attention—and to capture our hearts. A God who holds nothing back – not even his own son – allowing him to be crucified for our sake. Scorned for our iniquities. . .

A God who is crazy enough to expect us to love – in the very same way – by holding nothing back from him – or from one another.

--PAUSE--

In just a moment, four members of the parish – all members of some leadership committee within the parish – will come start off the foot-washing by coming forward.

They will remove one shoe and sock –and I will wash and dry their foot. Those four – will put their sock and shoe back on – and remain up front – to wash the foot of the next four people who come forward – at which time the original four return to their places.

So whoever gets a foot washed – stays to wash the foot of the next person coming forward. We will sing and pray and reflect for as long as it takes for everyone who want to have their foot washed – to come forward.

And Jesus said: you must do what I have done. . .