

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-14a Psalm 78 Luke 22:14-30
April 13, 2006
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
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The Slackline

There is a new sport called slacklining.

Slacklining grew out of the rock climbing community.

In the evenings after a hard climb,

 apparently some climbers,

 who don't tend to be people who enjoy sitting still very long,

 they began walking on the chains between posts at their camp site--

 just for fun, as sort of a balancing trick.

Eventually, someone came up with the idea of walking on climbing webbing,

which was a lot more fun than the chains,

 because the webbing had more bounce,

 and you could rig it up in some very unlikely and unusual places.

Needless to say, slacklining requires quite a bit of concentration as well as balance.

Some people do it just for fun.

Some do it as a sport,

 always pushing themselves to new, more challenging performance levels.

Others just find it relaxing.

Some have even found it a useful tool for meditation.

(Note: I do not speak from personal experience.)

I do, however, find a connection, however,

 between the last supper and slacklining.

First, the last supper.

That is what we hear this night, this Maundy Thursday,

 as we listen to Luke's gospel story.

Even though those words—"the last supper"—are not words from scripture,

 But words we use about this event in scripture,

 Most of us know exactly what we mean when we say "the last supper."

The first image many of us see in our minds

 is the painting by Leonardo DaVinci.

Twelve disciples—all men-- sitting (it appears in chairs)

 at a long table with Jesus in the center.

Most of us know that image.

In recent years, DaVinci's painting of the last supper
has become even more popular, thanks to Dan Brown's bestselling novel,
The DaVinci Code,
which has inspired millions to take a second—or first-- look
at the painting.

But I want to give you a completely different image of the last supper.
Imagine the nave of this church,
emptied of all its pews.
Yes, there is a table but it is low to the floor.
There are disciples on all sides of the table—
the scene is joyful but actually quite chaotic
(rather like our Third Sunday brunch—
or the gathering we had last night to create paschal candles).
Lots of joy, lots of chaos.

Look around the table.
There are men and women and children—
these are the apostles,
invited,
included,
gathering together to share this meal with Jesus.

Perhaps your traditionalist or literalist bent struggles with this--
perhaps you can only allow women into your upper room
if they are there to cook and serve the meal.
Believe it or not, I can live with that—
as long as you can live with the fact that Jesus
identifies himself with those who serve.
As tonight's gospel says,
...I am among you as one who serves.

Perhaps some of you think the children only came along this evening
because the babysitter didn't show up.
But maybe the family invitation came with the children's names
on the first line,
hand addressed by Jesus.
The greatest among you must become like the youngest.
So we heard in Luke's gospel.

Perhaps you have no problem imagining this supper scene,
with men and women and children sitting on cushions next to one another,
sitting together, eating together.

The scene, though unlikely in the historical context of Jesus,
certainly is not beyond the theological context of his ministry.
Radical hospitality is the pattern throughout the ministry of Jesus.
Turning things upside down and inside out is Jesus' style.
Inviting women. Welcoming children.
Talking to women.
Even listening to women.
Pretty radical,
even by today's standards.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus always includes
those whom others have excluded, shunned, belittled, judged.

Regardless of how you people the table,
there is one empty spot:
the place that is held for Jesus.

When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table.
So where is Jesus?

Look up.
No, not to heaven.
(Remember, it's only Maundy Thursday.)
Look just slightly up.

Do you see him?
There he is.
Balancing right up there on the slackline
(if you still can't get the image of a slackline—just think of a circus tight rope,
only a little wider, a little looser —get it—SLACKline!)

There's the slack line.
and it's stretched from beam to beam to beam,
stretched the entire length of the nave.
Zig zagging above the heads of the gathered apostles.
Just slightly taunt.
And there stands Jesus.
balancing over us all.
And he's walking,
step by step,
sometimes stopping, bouncing a little,
up, down, up, down.
Wondering.
Wondering if the folks gathered around the table
will ever acknowledge the truth of what is happening this night.
Wondering if anyone has the courage to face his impending death—and their own?

Because you see,
no matter how we people the table below—
 with twelve men sitting in chairs,
 or with a diverse gathering of children, women and men—
there is still an innate denial among us
 that anything bad could happen to Jesus.

But we have been with him.
We've seen upset the priests and the scribes have been when he teaches.
We've heard the rumors.
We are afraid. Only we don't admit it.
We've even thought about just walking away.
Jesus expects so much of us.
 Asking us to come up with loaves and fishes all the time.
But still...surely, Jesus can handle all this.

There is an elephant in the room—or in this case, a prophet on a slackline—
 but no one wants to acknowledge what is coming..
Jesus on the rope—the slack line-- is not a metaphor.
It is not a symbol of the dividing line between heaven and earth,
 with Jesus up in the divine sphere,
 and the apostles—us—left behind
 down in the human sphere.

Yes, we are fully human.
We continue to mire ourselves
 in arguments over which one of us is the greatest,
 which one of us is right, which one of us has God on our side.
Arguments are a wonderful means of distracting us from our true calling.
 We can be so busy arguing
 that we all fail to notice that Jesus has left the building.

If anything,
 Jesus calls us this night to erase divisions,
 to see the oneness,
 the unity and union of us all.

Maundy Thursday is the night
 when Jesus tries his hardest to breathe life into his disciples,
 life into the bread and wine they share, we share'
 breathing life even into death.

The Eucharist is about participating IN Christ.
 It is not about observation or analysis.
 It is about stepping forward and being received into all that is holy.

Holy gifts for holy people.

A place has been set for us at the table.

But the feast really takes place on the tightrope, the slackline,

Where everything is at risk.

where life and death,

heaven and earth,

sorrow and joy,

are held in constant, beautiful tension.

Maundy Thursday is a night that plunges us into darkness,

places us on the precarious death-line with Jesus,

This night teaches us everything we need to know.

Jesus prays we will do and remember.