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Boston Seminar
Maundy Thursday Sermon + Sikhism

When I was faced with writing a sermon for tonight I was naturally apprehensive. I do not know if you feel the same sorrow in your heart as I feel in mine regarding the subject of tonight's worship service but the Lenten period always effects my mood. I am a natural optimist so to be cast into weeks of gloom is unnatural and uncomfortable for me. And it is a gloom that is as unshakeable as the cold winter damp that creeps into and grabs hold of your bones during New England winters. Regardless of precautions and exposure to warmth throughout the day, once exposed, what seeps in stays.

And during one morning run I confessed my apprehension to my two running buddies. Now I am a very lucky grad student indeed. I can proudly say, regardless of the cliché manner in which this fact is revealed, that I have two of the best running partners any seminarian could hope for. Emma and Irene are two strong, beautiful, faithful, thoughtful, hard-working women training to be ministers. And training to be runners.

We frequently meet at the crack of dawn and attack the hills of Somerville. Often these runs end up being meaningful discussion sessions, a time when they and I can reflect on our lives, ranging from the comedic moments and to the deeper religious encounters. And so last Monday I presented them with this problem, the problem of Maundy Thursday.

I told them that I felt that it was a day of reverence, a day that embodies anticipatory grief, a day that is followed by the saddest day of the Christian year. Maundy Thursday, to me, was a day of grey mourning. But that I also felt that the scriptures to be read today, of the Passover and the footwashing were Biblical scenes not confined to grief but somehow had some light shining through. I told them I wanted to talk about Grace, beauty inherent within the darkest moments about radical hospitality. I told them I did not want to present you with a monologue of grief posing as a Thursday night sermon.

And so it is to their infinite wisdom that I dedicate this message. They teased out of me the hope that presents itself within our scripture lessons here today.

What we see in the Passover and the foot washing are two dire moments in which a community is placed in a vulnerable position. And what's more is their vulnerability is not due to any particular sin they have committed nor to any circumstance they have chosen. The Israelites are suffering enslavement and oppression and the disciples are on the brink of losing their Rabbi. Both communities are surrounded by impending darkness. Enshrouded, in fact, is the word that comes to mind, with all the macabre images that coincide.

But what splits these passages, the crack that is created for light to shine through, is the descent of the Divine in the form of radical hospitality.

And while we as Christians have our own stories of the underdog light overcoming the seemingly all-consuming darkness of the powerful forces of history, I would like to provide a new story of radical hospitality as our model for hope on this sad day in our liturgical year.

Immediately after 9/11, there was a scene of panic and confusion, of suspicion and fear. America was imbued with the kind of delicate vulnerability we haven't seen since the Revolutionary War. And our response was to imprison many of our fellow Americans.

One local member of our community experienced exactly the terror of oppression we feared as he rode a train south to Providence. His long beard and turban made him an easy target for those shocked by grief and grasping for control. But this man who was imprisoned was not a terrorist nor connected to any group whose aim it was to eradicate the United States and all that our nation stands for.

No, instead, he was just an American traveling for business. He was imprisoned and investigated because he looked like we thought a terrorist might. And yet, the religious community that man belonged to, a Sikh community hosted me and several of my classmates lately for a worship service.

Rather than close their doors to those who look like persecutors, they threw their doors wide open. They demonstrated radical hospitality inviting us to worship, ask questions and served us an intimate lunch. At the end of the visit they treated us with gifts of literature and blessed us.

Their humility in the face of fear, their open armed welcome to strangers is precisely what we as Christians honor here tonight. Tonight we move to a lowly bow before the stranger welcoming them and washing them in grace.

Emma and Irene turned me to Simone Weil and her book *Gravity and Grace*, which elucidated these reflections for me. She says,

-Grace is the law of descending motion.-All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by the laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.- We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention.

As we bow low beneath the weight of grief, when we turn our eyes downward in mourning, when we collapse because of pain, defy gravity and embrace grace. Move in a direction, a direction unexpected by you and by many, but which has prevailed throughout history.

The Israelites, through the movement of grace, created a new community with legal structures protecting and honoring the wandering stranger. The day before the death of the Lord, the Lord, through grace, humbled himself and commissioned a fresh community of newly-initiated followers. And the Sikhs, throughout their history of struggle and persecution continue to offer Christlike radical hospitality because the grace of loving another is really the only way to triumph over the imminent darkness of death.

Amen.