

TRADING PLACES

Maundy Thursday Meditation

April 9, 2020

Text: John 11:45-53



I like the Facebook meme that I have seen been posted on several pages this week: *"They're predicting this will be a rough week for America. It was a rough week for Jesus, too. But just look at the outcome."*

It borders on understatement to say that times are difficult. Part of what makes it so difficult is the fear ... a fear that exacerbated by uncertainty. As mentioned two Sundays ago, the most frequent command given in the Bible is "Fear not." It wouldn't have had to be so frequently commanded if fear was not a very common and understandable human trait. Again, in the words of Franklin Roosevelt, *"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear."* We looked at the story of King Jehoshaphat, who determined the welfare of his nation was more important than his fear, so Jehoshaphat brought his fear to worship. Worship, where we focus not on the enemy, and not on our limitations, but on God.

There is no denying that shutting down a country has fearful repercussions. People are being ruined! Businesses are on the verge of being destroyed. We are becoming totally dependent on the government for money and loans. One poll out there underscores that more people today are scared about the economic impact of all this than they are of the deadly virus itself, and that makes perfect sense. No matter where you go in the country, it's a ghost town. It's eerie. But what's even more subtly disconcerting to me in some ways is I really don't see the fear and the concern reflected in the so called experts, except for a few notable exceptions. Maybe it's just me, but I don't feel the concern, I don't see this fear and empathy reflected in so many of those doomsayers who paternally say such things as, *"Oh this must go on to the summer. Maybe a year! We may never get back to normal."* Part of me is tempted to respond, *"Yes, easy for you to say ... you're guaranteed an income. Walk a mile in our shoes, find out what it's like to have the insecurity we have, please communicate some assurance that you understand and care! Do you even have an inkling how the other half lives, what are our very real fears and concerns?"*

We like stories about people finding out how the other half lives. One popular example was **"Trading Places"**, a successful 1983 comedy directed by John Landis and starring Dan Aykroyd and Eddie Murphy. It tells the story of an upper-class commodities broker and a homeless street hustler whose lives cross paths when they are unknowingly made part of an elaborate bet; effectively, they trade places and learn the hard way how the other lives.

The storyline was often called a modern take on Mark Twain's classic nineteenth century novel The Prince and the Pauper. *(written in 1881 in Canada, this was Twain's first attempt at historical fiction).* Set in 1537, The Prince and the Pauper tells the story of two young boys who were born on the same day and are identical in appearance: Tom Canty, a pauper who lives with his abusive, alcoholic father in Offal Court off Pudding Lane in London, and Edward VI of England, son of Henry VIII of England, and they trade places for a time. Both protagonists in the novel learn invaluable lessons which make them better people in their respective roles in life.

Again, we like stories about people finding out how the other half lives. That's probably in part because at the core of the story of our salvation is a Savior who was willing to **trade places**, He took our place, He walked a mile in our shoes, He lived our life, in the incarnation. And yes, this was a rough week for Him.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, the author intimates that it is the resurrection of Lazarus which leads to Jesus' death. In a highly symbolic and prophetic way, Jesus **trades places** with Lazarus. Oh, not right away. But the way John portrays it, Jesus sets in motion the events

that lead to His crucifixion by spectacularly and publicly raising Lazarus. It made Him a target. By choosing to bring Lazarus out of the tomb, Jesus chose to move toward His own tomb. Because Jesus is willing to die, Lazarus is given life. This is wonderful imagery of the greater drama: This was the price necessary for our salvation. Jesus had to trade places with us so that we might live, now and forever. The One who was without sin must become sin for us, and bear our curse.

When your usual place is moved or shifted ... when your place **changes** ... it is disorienting, to say the least. Another reason this quarantine is so disconcerting is for that reason; we can't go to our usual places. We've lost our place (*except for our homes, which many are hoping they can keep as their incomes dwindle*). In like manner, when you lose someone you love ... be it a parent, a sibling, a spouse, or even a friend ... you experience almost a vertigo of spirit, because your "place" has changed, perhaps irrevocably. The "self" you once were can't seem to find its old place to land and nestle.. Like a homing pigeon that can't find its roost. Not only has your "place" changed, your very identity has changed: You are no longer a child, you are a middle-aged orphan. You are no longer a spouse, you are a widower. You are no longer one half a two-parent team, you are a single parent. The self you once were cannot find its old place to land, because it isn't there. You feel a bit lost. Your place has changed.

Every time I'm privileged to do a wedding, usually I stand right there, the bride is here and the groom is here and the bride's father is here. Both the bride's father and the groom love the bride. But if love is to mature, develop and continue to grow into a new family, these men who love the bride are now to have different places in her life. So we watch the high drama of the bride's father kissing the bride on the cheek ... and then sitting down. Then the groom moves over and stands next to the bride because now his place is next to her and the father's place is sitting down. If he loves his daughter, he'll know that's his place. His place is no longer next to her, his place isn't to be (or come) between them; if he loves her, he knows his place has changed. THIS SHIFTING OF PLACES IS ONE OF MANY SHIFTS NECESSARY FOR THE EXPANSION OF THE FAMILY, FOR THIS ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW FAMILY UNIT. Again, though, losing our place ... no matter how noble the reason ... is always disorienting. Trading places, changing identities, is difficult, it's disorienting. And this was no small part of the agony the Passion for Jesus. "Places" had to change. In the high drama of Calvary, Prince of Peace Jesus has to trade places with Pauper Us.

Pardon me while I wax a bit theological, but here is the drama: For all eternity, each member of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, knew their place. They experienced an intimate, eternal, extensive relationship. They were always in perfect, loving communion. Out of the perfect love this Trinitarian "Family" enjoyed came the divine decision to extend their family, to expand their circle of love, to do what it takes to bring others into this wonderful Place. This was the divine plan. But a price had to be paid to make this "marriage," this union, possible. Someone had to move from His accustomed place; in this case, it wasn't the Father of the Bride. No, it was the one the Bible calls the Bridegroom; He is the one who had to move. For a painful moment in time, Jesus had to move ... He had to move from His place of being the Beloved to being the accursed, which culminates in the crucifixion on Good Friday, when He assumes our place and absorbs the penalty of our sin. That was the bridal price paid to bring the Bride into the Holy Family.

Yes, it was a rough week for Jesus. But just look at the outcome.

As Augustine expressed it, the Trinity consists of the **Lover** (God), the **Beloved** (Jesus) and the **Love** (the Holy Spirit). God the Lover Loves the Son, the Beloved. And because the Son was willing to trade places with us, the Holy Spirit now takes what is the Son's and gives it to us by grace, pours it into us, so much so that we become the Beloved **in Christ**, thus making us heirs of grace and part of the Holy Trinitarian Family.

The grand wonder of our salvation is that we are "married into" this eternal triune Family, this relationship, so that the Trinity now consists of Father, Son, Holy Spirit ... and Matt and Olivia and John and all of you who with us on line who have said "Yes" to the Trinitarian proposal.

This is the communion of saints. This is what gives us our place at this Family Table.