Maundy Thursday

Meditation

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Jeffrey Marx in his compelling book *Season of Life* tells the story of two high school football coaches up in Baltimore, Joe Ehrmann and Biff Poggi who coached for years the football team from the Gilman School. The Gilman School is known up in Maryland for both its competiveness in the classroom and on the playing field. In particular they are known for their annual dominance in football. If they aren't winning the state championship they are usually playing for it. Strangely though, "winning" isn't the word that comes to mind when you talk to coach Ehrmann and coach Poggi. It's not what they see as their role – to get boys to win football games. It's nice if that happens to be sure, but all along Joe and Biff see it as their jobs to help these teenage players discover what it means to be men. Their job is to teach them, (while they are teaching them football), to understand what it means to be a whole human being. "Building Men for Others" is what they call their philosophy. Teaching young men to make a difference in the world. Marx recounts one moment when a mother pulled Biff aside and asked about how things were looking for the team -- how did he think the boys were going to be? She was obviously asking about the upcoming season. Imagine her surprise when the head coach said, "How are they going to be? I guess we won't know for about twenty years. I never know until they come back to visit in about twenty years – it's then that I'm able to see what kind of husbands they are, what kind of fathers they are, and

what time and effort they are giving to the community." Not what you expect to hear from a high school football coach. So what's the secret? How do you get boys to become men, real men? Biff and Joe say – the one thing you have to do to get a boy to become a real man – you have to teach them to love. The best men know how to love, really love. And so it should be no surprise to hear these two coaches gather up their players just before the game, one of them yells at the boys: "What's our job as coaches?" And the boys reply, "You're job is to love us!" And what's your job as players? Our job is to love each other." And with that the Gilman football team takes the field.

Now what Joe and Biff will tell you is that this philosophy of theirs is not their own. They stole it. Borrowed it, I suppose. And where they borrowed it from was from the pages of the New Testament. They borrowed it from the words of Jesus. They borrowed it from the one who sat at table with his own little team – his brothers in Spirit, the disciples – and what they heard this rabbi at the table say to his disciples was, "What's my job?" And they answered back, "You're job is to love us." "And what's your job?" And the answer he taught them was – "Our job is to love each other."

I give you, said Jesus, a new commandment – that you love one another as I have loved you. It's how girls become women; it's how boys become men. When you learn to love one another.

It's where we get that word Maundy – Maundy comes from the Latin *mandatum* from which we get the word mandate. I give you a new mandate, Jesus says. I give you a new commandment – that you love one another as I have loved you. It's what the vinegrower has always been looking for. The one who walks the fields and looks and peers through the grape leaves and sees the fruit. And he is looking for the good fruit. He's looking for the mature fruit, the fruit that makes the best wine. He is looking for real men, real women. No other fruit is acceptable. He is demanding of his vines – he will not allow them to grow anything less than the good, mature fruit. The sheers are in his hand to cut away anything inside you and me that might get in the way of the new fruit of the kingdom – that we would love one another as he has loved us.

And how, pray tell, has he loved us? Is it the sweet benign love of some indifferent grower who doesn't really much care how good the wine turns out? Take the cheap grapes and make ourselves some Boones Farm? No, this one at table was the one who took the water from that wedding and made it into the wine and not the cheap wine, but the best wine. The good stuff. That's what the grower is looking for – that's how he loves us. He prunes the bad stuff away so that we might become women and men. Real women and men. That we too might learn to love. Really love. Love like he loves. Love like he loves us. Because guess what?

You're not that easy to love. Did you know that – you're not that easy to love? If there is anything that tomorrow's cross is there to tell us is that we're not that easy to love. It might come as a big surprise, but you're not the cat's meow. Love one another as I have loved you, he said. He said it to those brothers of his … who weren't so hot themselves. Who were not really interested in being brothers to him. They were ready to cut and run.

But he loved them to the end. He loved them beyond the end. He was never going to let them go. Love one another as I have loved you, as I will love you though you betray me, deny me, doubt me and cut and run from me. Love one another. Not just love the ones who are easy to love. Not just love the ones who happen to agree with us. Not just love the ones who we have to love. But love the ones hard to love. The ones who don't agree. The ones we don't have to love because they will not even perhaps love us back. Because the truth is – you ain't no beauty yourself?

Marilynne Robinson in her breathtaking novel *Lila* tells the story about a young woman Lila whose mother abandons her when she was young and she spends a good part of her young life as a castaway – a castaway from just about everybody who crosses her path. From one house to the next as a young woman she's either forced to sleep on the porch or she is used and discarded by men of ill-repute. Finally she becomes a drifter and ends up in an Iowa town and because it's raining cats and dogs she runs into the back of a church and it happens on a Sunday morning. From the front the old widower preacher sees her in the back and he is intrigued. Not the kind of person that darkened the door of his church. And as the story unfolds the preacher befriends her and tries to

help her, but she gives him every reason not to help her, not to assist her, not to love her. And finally the preacher realizes that she doesn't really know what love is – and if she did she would never think herself worthy. So the only thing he can think to do to prove to her that there is love somewhere in the world for her … is to marry her. And so he does. But even that to this suspicious fearful haunted woman may not be enough proof. But she has his ring on her hand, she can't deny it. And at one point Lila says to herself, "That old man loves me. And I got to figure out what to do about it."

I wonder if that isn't a little of what might be taking place here. We who gather at table with the one who turns water into wine. The one who has a new mandate – that you love one another as I have loved you. Loved me? I got myself some sour grapes. I ain't now cat's meow. I got all kind of reasons for you not to love me, Mr. Vinedresser. As I have loved you. Is that what you said? As I have loved you? The old man really does love us. And now we got to figure out what to do about it.