

Maundy Thursday Tenebrae
April 9, 2009
San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
7:30pm

Rev. Jeffrey Cheifetz

Luke 22:7-8	Last Supper
Mark 14:32-42	Garden of Gethsemane
Luke 4:16-30	Rejected by his hometown
John 6:60-66	Many followers desert him
John 7:1-5	Jesus' brothers do not believe him
John 7: 45-52	Religious establishment dismisses him
Luke 22:47-53	Judas betrays him
Luke 22:54-62	Peter denies him
Matthew 27:45-54	Passion of the Cross

The darkness folds in around Jesus. The darkness of fear and failing courage. The darkness of family, friends, and hometown not understanding, turning away. The darkness of betrayal. The darkness of powerful opposition bent on his destruction. And literal darkness as the day ends and night comes.

We know the feeling of being alone, even being isolated in the midst of a busy and distracted world. A lack of inner light, inner fire, passion, even of interest. The coals of the heart are ashen and gray. No one truly understands us. The sound is of silence.

We have probably experienced the loss of friendship, of community, of love itself. We may have endured the unjust use of power and authority. We may have been cast out because of religious belief, political conviction, race, gender or sexual identity, or disability. And perhaps we have faced the possibility of death, not merely in the abstract, but as a haunting reality.

What keeps Jesus going? The tradition of the Passover, the center of the root story of Judaism, the ancient rehearsal of the rescue from servitude. Prolonged and heart-felt prayer that is a give-and-take conversation with God. A deep sense of his own place in the world, that of forth-telling the love and care of God for all people, for the neighbor, the 'other', and acceptance of that way of being for others.

What keeps us going? A spiritual practice? The love of family and friends? A deep passion for what we are doing in our career, our place of worship, our community? Commitment to a cause larger than ourselves? Anxiety over the next paycheck? Our hopes and dreams for our children, or siblings? Our sense of being needed by others? Our own love for life itself?

As people of the Book, we look to its stories and themes for inspiration, courage, and wisdom. We read them over and over again, looking for guidance in how to love ourselves, others, and God. For those who are ordained to lead congregations, there is an extra incentive to seek God's leading, for we are charged with the task of proclaiming good news to the people.

Nathan Kirkpatrick, a managing director of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School, writes, "Today is an especially holy day for those who serve as ministers of the Gospel. It is a day when clergy of a variety of denominations recommit to their callings by renewing their ordination vows. The symbolism is striking: before we clergy read to our congregations the stories of the betrayal of Jesus by those whom he chose to follow and serve him, we first pause to remember the ways that we have betrayed our calling and recommit ourselves to follow and to serve. Today, we recommit ourselves to keeping watch with those who agonize in their own gardens of despair. We pledge that we will no longer run away from the cross in our daily lives but cling to it. We renew our vow that we will not flee the suffering of the world but rather seek solidarity with those who suffer and bear witness to their plight. And above all else, we stake our souls on the belief that we are called to bear Easter's hope to a Good Friday world.

"So, today, whether you are ordained by action of a denomination or aware of a calling to such a ministry or living into a ministry as a baptized layperson, I would invite all of us to take a few moments this Holy Thursday to recommit to the callings God has on our lives however we understand them and however we live them."

(<http://www.faithandleadership.com/blog/04-09-2009/nathan-kirkpatrick-maundy-thursday>)

I invite all of us to use this time tonight, the ritual entry into the time of darkness before the breaking of the dawn on Easter, to enter into the unfinished nature of the season, and of our own lives, to seek the light of God's truth, and grace. For we recognize the unfinished nature of our own souls, and our need for maturity, and truth-telling, for forgiveness, and for renewal. We recognize the growth that has already happened, for we can name the beginnings of our spiritual journey, the twists and turns in the road, and the effect we have had on others for good, and truth, and peace.

Therefore we do this tonight not for ourselves alone, but also so that we might continue to be used as light-bearers to those who love us, as well as those who despise us; to those who understand us, and those who ignore us; to those who recognize our unique giftedness, and those who see us only through the lenses of history, prejudice, and unfounded rumor.

In darkness we struggle with humanity in its search for truth, for meaning, for a sense of security. We climb the steep path toward the light of wisdom that empowers us in those moments when the courage to speak and do righteousness comes in very handy. We explore the abyss of uncertainty with the mustard seed of faith that is already ours, and that is enough; and in doing so we partner with our neighbors of every faith tradition, and of no faith tradition, who also search the spiritual depths for riches.

The search itself is of great use, for it teaches us humility as well as gives us great inspiration. It underlines our weakness as well as points us to the Source of strength. It goads us to learn more, to grow deeper roots, to enjoy the unexpected insight, to trust more, and to cry and laugh more. It kicks us out of the those comfortable ruts that we have lived in for too long. It connects us with the whole of creation. It connects us with the homeless and the wealthy, the powerful and the powerless, the refugee and the enslaved, the complacent and the desperate.

Without the darkness of Christ's Passion, we do not arrive at Christ's Resurrection. We enter into it with both trepidation, and with trust,

for unlike the first disciples who lived it moment by moment we know the full story, and we have the assurance of new life. And the world needs that same assurance.

Let us then listen for the voice of the Lord to us as we continue in this service of worship. May we be blessed in our listening. And, may our families, friends, enemies, and places of work, education, and play, also be blessed.

So be it.