

April 3, 2022

John 13:21-38

It's Still Uncomfortable

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

Have you ever experienced word aversion? Word aversion, according to Ohio linguistics professor Paul H. Thibodeau is “a feeling of intense, irrational distaste for the sound or sight of a particular word or phrase, not because its use is regarded as etymologically or logically or grammatically wrong, nor because it’s felt to be over-used or redundant or trendy or non-standard, but simply because the word itself somehow feels unpleasant or even disgusting.” Having had the benefit of the definition, have you experienced word aversion?

This week, I saw a list of the most common words people with word aversion cite as the object of their aversion. So, I thought it would be fun to see if we could name them, in no particular order, without using Google. To be clear, I have not included words that have only one meaning and that meaning is inappropriate for a mixed-age group setting. So, check yourselves. We are looking for 6 words. Go!

Squid

Moist

Squelch

Coagulate

Ointment

Crevice

Isn't it funny how just the sound of a word can make us feel icky? Last week, Rev. Hubbard used one of the words I have an aversion to no less than 156 times. The word is intimacy. The minute she spoke the word the first time, I was uncomfortable. I don't like the sound of it or how it feels when I say it. And, if I'm honest, the idea of intimacy adds to the way the word itself makes me feel. Yet, there it was...the focus of her sermon. And there I was, sitting right in the front row, fresh from vacation, wanting very much to look supportive. At the very least, I wanted very much to not look uncomfortable. I mean...nothing she was saying was inappropriate or wrong. The scene in John 13, with Jesus and his closest friends, having their final meal together, is best described as intimate.

The story of that meal marks the beginning of what's called the farewell discourse in the Gospel of John. In it, Jesus turns away from the crowds he had been

drawing and turns toward his disciples. The way in which Jesus has been teaching so far in this gospel is very different from the other gospels. There are no parables, no Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain. His teaching here has been mostly through dialogue around the signs that Jesus does. Throughout the narrative, Jesus's teaching comes by way of explaining what the signs (miracles) point to about himself and about God.

In the farewell discourse, we hear Jesus speaking authoritatively to his disciples. This is his final chance to identify his mission and interpret the divine love that dwelled within Jesus as the presence of God. The farewell discourse pretends to describe Jesus preparing the disciples to live without him, but it's important to remember that this gospel was written for a community which existed 65 to 70 years after the crucifixion. This text was not about those first disciples; it was about the followers gathered in the community of Jewish mystics for whom the author of John wrote.

So, the author deals with the issues *that* community was facing. The disciples in the narrative become symbols of the community of believers for whom the Gospel of John was written. And that community was struggling with the reality of persecution and experiencing the pain of separation, not only from Jesus, but from the synagogue and community from which they had been excommunicated because of what they believed about Jesus and the ways of God he revealed.

Keeping all of this in mind, I want to take us back to that intimate, awkward night; the disciples reclining at the table, and Jesus, taking on the role of a servant, washing their feet, one after another. When he finished, he put his robe back on and joined them, reclining at the table, explaining, and teaching as he did. Jesus had shown them that there are no master-servant relationships inside the embrace of divine love. There was sacrifice and vulnerability. The disciples were being invited into this new order, they were welcomed at the table as family, as equals with one another and with Jesus. I imagine the air thick and a bit tense in that room. I imagine if the disciples had been wearing Apple watches, they would have gotten a reminder to breathe. And then, maybe, as Jesus sat down and reached for the wine, they all took a deep breathe. You know, like you do when you think the discomfort of an awkward situation is behind you. And then Jesus, who the text tells us was troubled, said:

Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.”²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.²³ One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.²⁵ So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.²⁷ After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him.²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor.³⁰ So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

If the disciples had, indeed, taken that deep breath of relief as Jesus joined them at the table, his announcement that there was a traitor among them must have sucked the air right back out of that room. “Here’s the deal, friends, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked around at each other, wondering who it was, probably each internally afraid it was them. What did Jesus mean anyway? What kind of betrayal? Peter (my favorite), often the one who said what everyone else was thinking, definitely not the type to be content sitting there in uncomfortable silence, asked “the Beloved Disciple” (“the one who Jesus loved”), who was reclining next to Jesus, who the betrayer was.

Before we get to his answer, can we take a moment to wonder, “Who was this Beloved Disciple?” We will read later in this narrative that he will be the only disciple present at the cross. He will be present on Easter morning, running to the empty tomb and going inside. He will be the first to believe Jesus had risen. And he will make a final appearance in Galilee, after the resurrection, where he will recognize Jesus and say to Peter, “It is the Lord.”

What we will notice about the Beloved Disciple whenever he is mentioned is that he was always in a position of intimate closeness to Jesus. Here, he was physically lying close to the breast of Jesus. It doesn’t get much more intimate than that. So, who is it that is so close to Jesus? Some have assumed it is the author of this gospel, presumably John, the son of Zebedee. The problem with that assumption is that there isn’t any proof he is the author of this gospel and why would he wait

until now to introduce himself that way? Why not set that up right from the start? John 1, “This is my story, and I am Jesus’s favorite, so I shall refer to myself as the “the one who Jesus loved.” Realistically, if scholars are right and this text was written 65 or 70 years after Jesus’s death, probably it was not written by one of the first twelve disciples.

Luther Seminary’s Dr. Karoline Lewis says this about the identity of the Beloved Disciple, “...the Beloved Disciple is the one who hears and reads this story; it is every disciple, it is you, it is I [me].”¹ So, we are Jesus’s favorite! All of us! Everyone! The Beloved Disciple is in intimate relationship with Jesus, so close to him that they can almost hear his heartbeat. And the function of this symbolic disciple in this story is as a contrast to the one who would betray Jesus. The Beloved Disciple embraces intimacy with Jesus.

Reclining there next to Jesus, he asked him who the betrayer was, and Jesus responded amid what feels a little bit like a cruel pause for effect, “It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.” And he took the bread, dipped it in the oil...and handed it to Judas. I bet you could have heard a pin drop in that room. I bet the disciples’ eyes were wide and their jaws dropped. The narrator tells us that evil entered Judas and Jesus told Judas to do what he was going to do; the disciples had no clue what that meant. They were still confused about what the betrayal was. And “Do quickly what you are going to do.” What did that mean? Did he want Judas to buy the food for Passover? Judas abruptly got up, left the table, and went outside. And it was night.

He removed himself from the community. The words, “And it was night,” should bear all the weight of what darkness symbolizes in the Gospel of John. I cannot resist, in this moment, the urge to remind you of Nic @ Night. The story of Nicodemus happened at night. Remember that Nic went away, unable to believe that God was doing something new in Jesus. In this story, Judas went outside in the dark, separated from his friends, separated from Jesus, separated from what God was doing. The next time Judas will appear in the narrative he will be standing outside the garden, where Jesus and the disciples had been many times, but this time Judas will be with soldiers and police, waiting to arrest Jesus.

¹ Lewis, Karoline, *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2014, 182.

Maybe Judas could not bear such closeness, such intimacy. True intimacy necessitates vulnerability and for a whole bunch of us, that's exactly why intimacy that requires us to be real, is terrifying. We use filters so our social media pictures don't show who we really are. When we make a mistake, the last thing we want to do is publicly admit it. We get sick and we don't tell anyone. We suffer loss and we grieve alone. We don't get the job we really want, and we don't tell anyone that our dreams have been crushed. Someone hurts our feelings and it's so much easier to get mad than to admit they have hurt our hearts. We find ourselves in the presence of injustice and we go along with it and don't make a fuss.

Here's what I think...I think a lot of us walk around thinking that eventually we will be wise enough, old enough, or experienced enough, that we won't feel the discomfort of vulnerability anymore. We assume that there will be a point when other people can't hurt or disappoint us, or that what they believe about us won't matter. We will finally be real grown-ups. Predictably, the older I get, the more certain I am that day isn't going to come.

Author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and other wonderful books, Madeleine L'Engle, said it well when she wrote, "When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown-up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability." From the moment we are born, we are vulnerable. To be human is to be vulnerable and that was true even for Jesus. It is no accident that it was in Jesus' humanity, that God was revealed. The human and the divine are not separate. God is not outside of us and our experiences. God is part of us, and we are part of God.

I've said before that I think Christians are too hard on the character of Judas. He did what a lot of us do when we feel vulnerable. He put distance between himself and what was making him feel uncomfortable; the person that was making him feel at risk of being hurt or maybe at risk of being fully discovered. But what Jesus needed from Judas and from all of his disciples was a willingness to risk, to grow, and to recognize that when we show people who we really are, we show them who God really is too.

And friends, that's what God needs from us too. God needs us to stop trying to protect ourselves from the risk we take when we love other people. God needs us to love people recklessly, even though they may reject us, even though they

might not love us back. Do you know what else happened at that meal with Jesus and his friends? He said these familiar words, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

We may be tempted to read this as a charge by Jesus for us to love our neighbors. Let me assure you, that's not what this is about. Jesus was at the table, talking to his closest friends. This was a very private, intimate moment. He had just explained to them he was going away, and they couldn't come with him. His concern in that moment was only for them. He knew that in the days to come, they would need each other more than ever. They would be desperate and alone, feeling hopeless and confused. So he told them, "Love each other. Love the people around this table first. And let them love you." What a gift those words must have been to the original readers of this text who were feeling alienated and vulnerable. And they can be the same gift to us.

Let the people in this room, the ones who gather at this table with you, let them love you. And love them back. We need each other to do the hard work of our shared ministry. The work of justice and inclusion in NE OK can be really hard and feel really isolating. We have to love each other first, before we can love other people. We have to allow ourselves to be seen, our whole selves. And remember you are never alone and you are loved more than you know. Amen.