

April 24, Fifth Sunday of Easter: John 13:31-35

by [Emlyn A. Ott](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue

I have powerful memories of the days before mandatory seat belts and car seats, when my brother and my sister and I would jockey to sit in the front seat of the car. Leonard Sweet refers to mothers as “the original seat belt.” Whenever mine slowed down for a red light, she would place her arm protectively in front of the child to her right. That gesture remains a poignant sign. I now do the same thing with my own front-seat passengers. In this era of reinforced, quick-clicking, chest-protecting strips of metal and plastic, that protective arm still means love to me.

Most of us have memories of actions that bring to mind a deeper connection or reality. An embrace, a look, a quality in a voice, a gathering around a table. “Watch what people do,” said family systems guru Murray Bowen again and again, “not what they say.” An outward gesture of care is the culmination of words made flesh and ideas put into action. It is one of the constant challenges for hopeful Christians, shaped by Good Friday and attentive to Easter: How do we engage in actions that demonstrate what we believe?

Each Thursday night in our seminary community, an open table is shared. Bexley Seabury—an Episcopal seminary with which Trinity Lutheran Seminary has shared a campus and a teaching ministry in Columbus, Ohio, for 15 years—opens its kitchen, offices, tables, and chairs to invite everyone in the combined community to share a meal. Known as “Common Meal,” this Thursday night ritual began as a celebration of the transition from formal classes during the week to the weekend focus on formation and fieldwork.

What it has become over the years is a real-life, down-to-earth action sign.

Common Meal is about ecumenical commitment, but not just that. It is about offering a morsel to others regardless of our agreements or disagreements, but not just that. It is about servant leadership, but not just that.

Recently, our partners across the table at Common Meal began to reimagine their ministry—and made preparations to move to another city. The reality of this move continues to sink in for those of us who will remain after Bexley Seabury embarks on

new adventures in Chicago. The grief has been palpable.

There remains an action sign that is rumbling around the community that will stay in Columbus. How will we retain the experience of Common Meal? What might it look like for the future? And how can we offer thanks to those who have comforted us and challenged us by who they are and what they believe in—for real, in the flesh?

In this Eastertide series of Gospel texts, we are in the front seat with Jesus. As he puts it in this week's reading, we are his "little children." His arm is around us in the face of what is to come.

Just before this passage we read about various signs that give a glimpse into the fleshy reality of what it might mean to be a disciple. Jesus uses both words and deeds to prepare his followers for his absence. He washes their feet. He gives a morsel of bread to Judas and then gives pretty extensive instructions about what is to come, as well as a prayer for the future. All of this is done in a haze of past, present, and future. Are the disciples watching for what it means to really, really love? Are we?

Jesus repeats something here that he has said before: the disciples cannot go where he is going. We are to participate and "be" with Jesus through love—loving the world and one another with depth and breadth, with humor and constancy and strength. Everyday love, says Jesus, is crucial.

In his final speech, Martin Luther King Jr. shared a vision of a renewed love and capacity for change:

It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and God's children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee.

The new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, the new [your community].

We learn by example. We watch what people do. Sometimes we automatically copy those actions that have an impact on us. As we act on Jesus' commandment to "love one another just as I have loved you," we can notice what connects or doesn't. An

arm lovingly outstretched. Bread shared with someone with whom we disagree, or someone who has betrayed us. Caring for that part of life that is broken or ugly, smelly or frightening, that has been walking through the muck. Action embodies words. It points the way to what it might mean to live in the love that Jesus shared through his life, death, and resurrection.

We do all this action imperfectly. We join Peter and our other colleagues in being amazingly obtuse. Perhaps the gathered community at our seminary will not fully understand the gifts offered, the lessons learned, until our ecumenical partners are no longer brushing elbows with us. The gift of love has been shared. Our challenge involves what that will look like in the future.