

Maundy Thursday 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.
So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'
Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life.

Dear Friends:

The strange word "Maundy" simply means commandment. Mandate, mandatory, command, demand. These are all part of the word family that includes the 15th Century Middle English word "Maundy." Today is Commandment Thursday. Maundy Thursday. And the commandment is to love. "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*" It's the simplest thing in the world. Love others as God has loved you. Not the easiest thing in the world. But the simplest.

Jesus' last supper was on a Thursday night. He was executed the next day. Although we might spend Thursday in Holy Week contemplating the meal, and Jesus' words about body and blood, bread and wine, the title of the day steers us to the commandment to love. Which Jesus embedded in the last supper by washing the disciples' feet. And by talking about washing their feet. That this is model behavior. "For I have set you an example," Jesus says, "that you also should do as I have done to you." I have washed your feet. You should wash one another's feet. I have loved you. You should love one another. In the context of Holy Week, we might hear this as Jesus' last request before dying. A dying man's request. Love one another as I have loved you.

Many Christian communities actually perform foot washing ceremonies. The pope will wash feet on Maundy Thursday, usually twelve individuals who are outcasts in some way— prisoners, refugees, people from other religions. In some Christian churches, the members will wash each other's feet whenever they schedule communion, or what they typically call an *agape* feast. Churches that are very interested in doing things the way they were done in the New Testament are more likely to include foot washing in their worship gatherings. The Brethren churches were established on that basis, and the hymn we are about to sing ("Will You Let Me Be Your Servant?") was influenced by such communities and comes to our hymnal from their hymnals.

So there are different approaches to the practice of footwashing. Some Lutheran congregations have switched to hand-washing, where people wash each other's hands, rather than feet, on Maundy Thursday. Washing feet is an uncommon action in our civilization, a civilization of shoes and socks, of pavement and automobiles, of indoor plumbing and hot and cold running

water. In Jesus' society, it was an ordinary thing. The extraordinary thing is *who* does the foot washing. Usually it would be a servant, or someone near the bottom of the social ladder. So when the host, or the highest ranking person, performs this task, it is a role reversal. As if Queen Elizabeth came to dinner and offered to set the table.

It's hard for us to experience foot-washing as an act of hospitality, which is exactly what it was. When someone arrives at my home after driving a car all day, I offer them a shower, a glass of wine, a chance to lie down. I may be eager to talk with them and to enjoy their company, but if I care about them, I know that they probably need a bathroom break, and a chance to stretch out a bit. So footwashing is a thoughtful gesture, an act of welcoming and putting your guest at ease. And it is a humble service, which involves someone sitting beneath you, on the floor, at your feet. An act typically performed by a servant. I think of the maids, the housekeepers, in a large hotel. How they are poorly paid, and how many of them are immigrants from other countries. I think of the filthy messes that they sometimes face. The accusations of theft. Sexual harassment by hotel guests. They have to be unobtrusive and stay quietly in the background. And yet, they are the ones who make us comfortable. Who make sure the sheets are clean, the toilet paper is stocked, the air conditioning is turned on, the pillows are fluffed, the TV remote control is where we can find it, and that the closet doesn't have any foul odors. They provide for *my* comfort and hygiene and pleasure. And yet I rarely think about them or acknowledge them. That was the role of a foot-washer in Jesus' society. And that's the role he took in the night in which he was betrayed.

So foot-washing poses interpretive problems. If we re-enact it as it is described, its meaning may be different than what was originally intended. This is the problem of the towel. Jesus wraps himself in a towel, and commences to foot-washing. But it's hard for us to understand what that means. It's hard for us to put on a towel and imitate Christ in that manner.

Over the last year of pandemic, we have adapted to CDC guidelines. In every area of our lives. We have made sacrifice after sacrifice after sacrifice. This may not have been the year that we put on a towel. But it is the year that we put on a face mask. For a long time, it has been clear that when you put on a mask, it is not primarily to protect you. But to protect others. It's inconvenient. It's awkward. It can even be a little bit gross if you sneeze. But it saves lives. It's a sacrifice made for others. It's the kind of love that Jesus is talking about on Maundy Thursday. He loved us sacrificially so that we might more readily love others sacrificially.

Think of the other things you have done. You probably are not going out as much to do the things you love. Including coming to church. And when you do get to do the things you love, you find that it is not as much fun, not as spontaneous. Grandparents cannot hug grandchildren. We're all standing around six feet away from each other. Keep two shopping carts distance in the checkout lines. And on and on.

And now we are coming into the season of vaccinations. Some people don't like getting shots. Some people don't know how to register online for a drive-through spot in a parking lot

somewhere. But vaccinations for Covid are not only good and essential for your health, they are good and essential for your neighbor. For society. For “herd immunity.”

Whenever they say “herd immunity,” I want to moo like a cow. But the fact is, all of these things— vaccination, physical distances, online meetings, and masks— these are things we do not just for ourselves. But for the sake of others. For the sake of our loved ones, our neighbors, and the strangers that we will never meet and never know. For the herd.

And even when vaccinated, our sacrifices will continue for a while. For the sake of those who cannot be vaccinated. A lot of people are confused and afraid. Others are eager, but the supply just isn't there yet. Eligibility does not mean availability. So for the sake of our neighbor, we continue to forego our freedoms and pleasures. Not because we have to. Or because we want to. But because Jesus said that we should love one another. We should put on a towel and start washing feet. Or better, put on a mask again, for a while longer. Love wins. That's the point of Holy Week. Love wins, but it isn't easy. *“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”* It's the simplest thing in the world. Love others as God has loved you. Not the easiest thing in the world. But the simplest.

The apostle Paul once wrote, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”* What you are doing when you put on a mask is making a sacrifice. Not sacrificing a goat. Not sacrificing a dead animal on an altar. But in Paul's words, offering your body as a living sacrifice. Foregoing your rights and your privileges and your personal preferences to do what is best for others. Paul calls that your spiritual worship. It is the new commandment. The only commandment. To love others as he loves. Sacrificially. Unconditionally. For the greater good. You have been doing so well, for so long. It really has been a living sacrifice. Holy and acceptable to God. Easter always comes. Love always wins. In the worst and most isolated of places, Love always wins. Amen.