

**Thursday, March 29, 2018**

**Maundy Thursday**

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

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On this holy night, we come to the end of our Lenten journey and begin a new journey. The beginning of what is known as the Triduum – the Three Days – that begins with sundown on this day and extends through sundown on Easter Day. From the beginning of Jesus' Passion, to in his death on Good Friday, culminating in the glory of his Resurrection on Easter. It was on this first day of the Triduum that Jesus' had his last meal with his disciples. What we know and now commemorate as the Last Supper. As we hear in scripture, this period coincides with the Jewish festival of Passover, which Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem to celebrate when he was arrested, taken to trial, and executed.

This celebration of Passover is of great significance, not just for the Jews of Jesus' time, but for our Christian story, as well. Of course, Passover is the celebration of the liberation of ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt. As we heard in our Old Testament reading, the Israelites were commanded to paint the doorposts and lintels of their homes with the blood of a lamb. This was the sign that the angel of death was to pass over that house, sparing the lives of the inhabitants. Hence the name.

Because of our Jewish roots, this concept of Passover has carried over into our own Christian heritage. Hence, throughout the Triduum, we have the theme of Passover and liberation in mind as we move toward Easter – our Passover – and our own liberation. We have our own parallel to Passover in Jesus Christ, who is sometimes even referred to as "our Passover." We even use this language at times. During Eucharist, at the breaking of the bread, our Prayer Book designates that the celebrant says "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" – recalling our understanding of Christ as the new Passover, who has passed over from death to life. Whereby in his death and resurrection sin and death have been defeated, and thereby have passed over us.

Given our emphasis on the death and resurrection of Christ, I suppose the Church could have easily just focused on the two days of Good Friday and Easter with their central themes of death and resurrection. After all, Maundy Thursday was just a prelude to the main events. Why bother with adding an extra commemoration into the mix? One more night at church during an already busy week.

Well, aside from commemorating Jesus' last meal with his disciples, which is important as it established one of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus himself – Holy Communion – it also sets the stage by preparing us in a fundamental way for the events that are to follow. To prepare us for how we are to receive those events, to participate in those events, to make them a part of who we are, to take their meaning and intent out into the world with us as we live our lives of faith.

And while in Good Friday and Easter we recognize our own Passover, our own liberation, from the power of sin and death, at Jesus' last Passover meal, he also celebrated a different form of liberation – even beyond freedom from sin and death – in the actions that are the center of our Maundy Thursday commemorations. Making Maundy Thursday critical to our own Passover experience.

This is evident in the very name of this day, Maundy Thursday. “Maundy,” from the Latin *mandatum*, which means “commandment,” is the first word of the Latin translation of Jesus’ statement to his disciples: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn 13.34). This new commandment is more important than even the meal which preceded it – at least in John’s Gospel. For John, the primary action at the Last Supper is Jesus washing the disciples’ feet as a symbol of love and service – a model of how they are to relate to each other. In the washing of the disciples’ feet, Jesus performs the duty of a servant. He is modeling that the true sign of discipleship is not leading but serving. To the overall experience of Passover meal, Last Supper, and new covenant, is added a new commandment. “That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

In my personal experience of Maundy Thursday, I don’t just experience what happened 2,000 years ago in the Upper Room. At the same time, in a way only possible during this most holy time of the year, I also remember – I experience again – another foot washing that took place nearly four decades ago. And yet, each Maundy Thursday, as I remember, it is as if it has just happened. As if it is happening even now.

I know I shared this with you last year. But I find that it not only has great meaning for me, but also can be a powerful illustration of what Jesus was talking about when he issued his command to love one another, using servant ministry in general and the washing of feet in particular, as an example. And while I am always reluctant to repeat examples in my sermons too frequently, as I prayed about this day – Maundy Thursday 2018 – I knew I needed to relive this story for myself, and to again share this story with you.

My first experience with foot washing was when I was a junior in high school. Our entire youth group went to a camp in the San Bernardino Mountains over Presidents Day weekend. There were hundreds of youth there from all over Southern California. On the first night, as part of the opening worship experience, we were told to sit down in small groups, in circles, and to take off our shoes and socks. The room was dimly lit. There was soft contemplative music playing in the background. Someone brought basins of water and placed them in the center of each circle. We were then instructed to pair up and to take turns washing each other’s feet. There was a great deal of reluctance on the part of most present, myself included. Finally, Dennis, my foot-washing partner and also our youth group advisor, took the initiative. He took my bare feet and gently, tenderly washed them in the basin of warm water. Almost as soon as he started, I began to cry. Having someone wash my feet was such a humbling experience. I felt so vulnerable, having someone care for me in such a way, to completely give up any control over the situation and what was being done to me, to drop my guard enough to allow another to care for me.

And then, when he was done washing my feet, I washed Dennis' feet. I continued to cry, but for a different reason. I was crying because I had to be vulnerable in a different way. Once again, I had to let my guard down, but this time it was to allow myself to be open and vulnerable to serving another in an intimate way. This act required that I tear down any barriers I had between me and this other person, to allow myself to enter into an intimate connection with another. Even in the midst of the tears, I felt the joy of being able to care for another. The tears of humility and vulnerability turned to tears of joy. I felt the joy of being able to connect in a very deep way, in a non-verbal way, with another of God's beloved children, to share a moment of mutual vulnerability, where we were able to connect on a spiritual level.

That is what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples as he washes their feet. That they – that we – need to be able to humble ourselves to serve others; that we need to be willing to open ourselves to be vulnerable to others, to be vulnerable in the presence of others, particularly those whom we are serving; and that we must allow an intimate connection to develop with those we are ministering to. Only by allowing these – humility, vulnerability, intimacy – to occur, can one be open to truly experience God's love and God's presence. Only in this way can we be liberated from our own pride, our focus on ourselves, and enter into the humble obedience our Lord demonstrated in his life, his ministry, and his Passion. Only in this way can we truly live the Gospel. For the power of the Gospel to transform the world is only manifested when we follow the Lord's example of self-giving love through service to others.

Jesus is demonstrating humble, vulnerable, intimate love for his beloveds. As he is washing their feet, he is at the same time demonstrating the love that would be more fully enacted the next day in his death on the cross. The ultimate act of humble service. The ultimate act of vulnerability. The ultimate act of intimacy. The ultimate act of liberation. The ultimate act of love.

I find the act of washing feet is one of the most meaningful signs of my priestly ministry – to be of service to the disciples I am called to serve. I no longer experience tears when I am privileged to wash someone's feet, but rather a humility that brings great joy. Washing feet reminds me, even if only once a year, that while I am the head of this community, I am also servant to all of you. That I am called to a ministry of hospitality, to be vulnerable to enter into intimate relationship with God and with God's beloved children.

In our commemoration of Maundy Thursday, we are reminded in a very real way that we are all Jesus' disciples. And that we are invited by our Lord to love one another more humbly, more deeply, more fully, through our own actions. Demonstrating the essence of holy love that he showed for us all through his own actions – especially in going to the cross.