

Thursday, April 9, 2020

Maundy Thursday

John 13.1-17, 31b-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/3361168497246507/>

(Sermon begins at about 18:20)

“Living Maundy Thursday”

On Maundy Thursday, we typically focus on two things. The Last Supper, in which Jesus instituted the sacrament that we refer to as the Eucharist, and Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. Although our Gospel reading for this day doesn’t quite bear that out. John’s version actually has a slightly different set of priorities.

We are told in our Gospel reading that Jesus was sharing supper with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. There are no details about the meal itself. Just what came before: the foot washing. In John’s Gospel, the foot washing, not the Eucharist, is the focus of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples. There is no explicit institution of the Eucharist, as is in the Synoptic Gospels. And for good reason. For John, the Eucharist is not a commemoration of a particular event, but rather is a sharing in all of Jesus’ life. For John, the institution of the Eucharist occurs in the “I am” discourse in Chapter 6—some six months or so before his last Passover meal—where Jesus says “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them” (Jn 6.53-56).

As so often in dealing with four separate—and at times, differing—Gospel accounts, we have conflated the stories. The Synoptic Gospels all specifically mention Jesus using the Last Supper as the moment to institute the Eucharist. This account is then repeated in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, which we also heard read this evening. These accounts are obviously important, as they establish what has become a central part of our regular worship experience. For Eucharist, in its sacramental nature, sums up what our faith is about. That the outward signs of bread and wine represent the inward grace of Christ’s Body and Blood given for us for the forgiveness of our sins, to strengthen our relationship with Christ and one another, and to be a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that we will all one day share.

And yet, that is not where John goes in his account of this day. Instead, he focuses on the foot washing. Now, foot washing was nothing particularly spectacular or out of the ordinary in Jesus’ day. Foot washing was a common act of hospitality that was offered to guests who had arrived after a journey. The foot washing was generally performed by servants or by the guests themselves. The unique thing about this foot washing is that it was done by Jesus, who is the host of the meal. His actions combine the roles of host and servant. This is why Peter initially refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet. The host simply did not do that. In the discourse that follows, Jesus indicates that the foot washing is not about hygiene, but is about relationship.

Inviting one into deeper relationship with him. The act of Jesus washing their feet is a tangible expression of his love for his friends.

John's theology, his understanding of who Jesus is, shapes his telling of the events of the night before Jesus' death. As such, the focus of the events of that last night tell us something about what was important to Jesus. After he has finished washing their feet, he asks the disciples, "Do you know what I have done to you?" (Jn 13.12). He goes on to explain. The most critical part of his explanation is "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, that you have love for one another" (Jn 13.34-35). One of Jesus' final messages to his disciples before his death is about the importance of caring for and loving each other. Not just in words, but in their very actions—just as he demonstrated through the washing of their feet. An act of servant ministry.

The ramifications of this are profound. The Rev. Scott Stoner writes in his reflection for Wednesday of Holy Week in our *Living Well Through Lent* devotional: "In our culture, the idea of love is often talked about as a feeling. A deeper understanding of love, though, is grounded in the realization that love is first and foremost a decision, an act of faith, an act of the will."¹ In Jesus commanding the disciples—and us—to love one another through our actions, he is implying that it is not about a feeling, but about making the conscious choice to live out our faith, to live out our love for him through our actions. As the Rev. Heidi Haverkamp further notes in her reflection for Maundy Thursday, Jesus' commandment invites us into "a kind of vulnerability and service Jesus was talking about."²

So central is Jesus' new commandment to our life of faith and particularly to our commemoration of Holy Week, that it is the reason this day bears the name that it does: Maundy Thursday. The strange name "Maundy" is derived from the Latin *mandatum* (the origin of the English word "mandate"), which is the first word of the Latin translation of the Scripture passage "A new commandment I give you."

That's the backstory. What this day is all about. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." That Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as a sacramental sign of his profound love for us. That he gave his body and his blood for us, for the forgiveness of our sins and to secure for us the promise of eternal life. And he gave us a new commandment that we are to love one another as a response to his love for us. As an invitation to share that love with others in tangible ways. For John, the two actions—Eucharist and foot washing—were all summed up in Jesus' commandment to love one another. They are all part of a single package. The new commandment expressed through foot washing flowing from and in response to Christ's loving gift of himself expressed through the Eucharist.

In any other time, we would be commemorating this commandment to love one another through the dual actions of Eucharist and the washing of feet. But not this year. Circumstances make that impossible. We can't wash each other's feet when practicing social distancing. We can't celebrate the Eucharist when we are sheltering in place. So how do we commemorate and celebrate the two most important aspects of this day—the most important aspects of our faith—when we are separated from each other?

The irony is, this pandemic, which has necessitated social distancing and sheltering in place, while preventing us from doing Eucharist or foot washing, has not succeeded in keeping us from honoring and commemorating the new commandment that Jesus has given us. If anything, our present circumstance has been a catalyst to more fully live into the commandment to love one another.

Why do we maintain social distancing? Why do we shelter in place? Why do we wear face masks when out in public? The original narrative was that we needed to do these things to prevent ourselves from becoming infected with the coronavirus. And that is certainly part of it. But if you've noticed, over the last couple of weeks the narrative has shifted. Particularly as we are now learning that people can be infected with COVID-19 and not even know it because they are asymptomatic. So now we are being told that we do these things—sheltering in place, social distancing, and wearing masks—as a way of protecting others. As Surgeon General Jerome Adams commented in an interview I saw last weekend, when I wear a mask, I help prevent you from getting sick if I happen to be infected. And if you wear a mask, you help prevent me from getting sick in the event you are infected. It's about caring for each other in a tangible way. It's about loving each other in a tangible way.

But even closer to home, so to speak, is what I am hearing from all of you. As I've made calls, two things have really moved me. First, I ask how the person I am calling is doing under these crazy circumstances. Invariably, the response I get is "I'm fine. But how are you?" I can't tell you how moved I am that people are asking about how I'm doing. I shouldn't be, but I am. Knowing that you are as concerned for me as I am for you. And second is that nearly everyone I've talked to tells me stories of how others are reaching out to them. How other parishioners are calling or sending cards and notes, just to check in and let them know they are thinking of them, that they care about them. Here again, I've been the recipient of some of this myself. I am greatly moved when parishioners call or email or text just wanting to know how I'm doing, wanting to know if I need anything, or if I just need to talk. Or, in one case, wanting to know if I needed any face masks. I am also moved by the calls and emails and text messages that I receive from parishioners telling me about how other parishioners are doing. Particularly if there is some concern that I need to be aware of. In all these ways, you are all showing love for one another in tangible ways, just by reaching out. It may seem a small thing, but it means so much to the one you reaching out to. And it demonstrates that you truly get Jesus' commandment to love one another.

We may not be able to do the things we normally do on Maundy Thursday: coming together to worship, washing each other's feet, and commemorating the Last Supper by celebrating Eucharist. Despite that, we are certainly living Jesus' commandment to love one another. In fact, by what we are having to do instead, by how we are responding, we are more fully living into that commandment than we would be if we were actually worshiping together in person. Because what we would be doing at any other Maundy Thursday—the foot washing and the Eucharist—are just symbols. What we are doing instead—that's the real thing. That's loving one another for real. In tangible ways. In these dark times, we are truly living into the spirit of Maundy Thursday through our words and our actions. Keep up the good work!

¹ Scott Stoner, *Living Well Through Lent 2020: Practicing Courage with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind* (Living Compass, 2020), p. 63.

² *Ibid.*, p. 64.