

Maundy Thursday
April 17, 2025
Exodus 12: 1-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

All of our readings for Maundy Thursday have to do with commandments in one way or another. And this should not surprise us, for the name of the day itself comes from the word commandment. “Maundy Thursday” is really “Mandate Thursday,” “commandment Thursday,” because it was on this day that Jesus gave his disciples the new commandment, that they – and we – should love one another as Christ loved them and loves us today. This is also the day when Christ instituted the Eucharist, to be celebrated in his memory, and that too is a commandment that we follow – to “do this in remembrance” of Jesus. But the new commandment given on this night is to love each other, so that we represent Christ to each other and to the world.

And this may well be the most difficult thing we will ever do – love each other. Because love means letting down barriers, getting personal, getting – dare I say – intimate with each other in the original meaning of the word, made familiar with each other – made like family. And that’s exactly what Jesus would have us do: become family to each other, knowing each other not as strangers or as acquaintances, but as people who share a house, share meals, share a life and ministry and mission together, giving our bodies and sometimes our blood to the work that God calls us to do.

This is not at all an easy thing to do, especially in this age where we whiz past each other on the street, where we often connect through computers and phones, rather than face-to-face, where we gladly hide behind social formalities so that people “think well of us,” where we might right now be shying away from the idea that being a Christian today might mean laying our bodies on the line for those God asks us to serve. Many of us might not want to be that intimate; might not want to have that much skin in the game.

And this is not a new phenomenon by any means, as we see in our Gospel reading. Despite the fact that the disciples have been traveling with Jesus for several years now, have shared the ups and downs of life together, look at how uncomfortable the disciples are when Jesus takes off his outer robe – the symbol of his authority as a teacher – and begins to wash their feet. Surely their feet were gnarled and unlovely,

these men who tramped the roads and worked as fisherman and as manual laborers. And surely their feet were dirty from the day's travel, covered in dust and perhaps other substances that are less pleasant to think of but that are part of country life. It's no wonder that Peter shies away from the breaking of social barriers and gives voice to what the other disciples must also have been thinking: "Jesus, are you going to wash my feet? They – they stink! They're dirty! That's not something you should be doing for me. That's servant's work. It's beneath you!"

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does. Because nothing is beneath you if you love someone, if you are truly intimate with them. Parents perform the most intimate tasks for their young children until they learn to tend themselves... and often those same children, grown to adulthood, serve their parents by performing those tasks in return, when their parents are no longer capable of doing so. We know this instinctively, and many of us have personal knowledge of these tasks. We can look at ourselves and know that we serve out of love, and "being beneath us" never enters the picture. Love brings down all barriers, and service in love is one of the greatest gifts we can give or receive.

Why, then, has the Episcopal Church, along with other denominations, begun to shy away from the foot-washing that has been part of this service for hundreds of years, and substituted washing hands instead? We who are supposed to be family, we who are children of God and siblings of Christ, why not, for this one night, put away our shyness or our pride or our fear, and let someone sitting here in the pews with us show intimacy to us as Christ did for his disciples? Because that is what Christ calls us to do, every day of the week: to lay aside our reluctance and our barriers, and serve each other, love each other, as Jesus loved and served his friends. I think we lose something when we substitute washing hands for washing feet, as the national church has done for several years now. I know intellectually why it's done – because it's better to wash something than not participate at all. And I am not going to buck the trend and say that hand-washing needs to go away, if that's what some communities choose to do. But I do want to point out that we lose something deep and powerful when we refuse to take off our armor, along with our shoe, and let someone serve us intimately.

The other readings we hear tonight also talk about community, and commandment, and are all precursors that were and are meant to bring us to this point of being family, of being able to be intimate with each other without fear or embarrassment. The first reading from Exodus is the passage that discusses the institution of the Passover meal, where everyone is to join together and eat, no one left out, no one lagging behind to eat after all the chores are done. And we are told that this is to be a

perpetual observance, so that no one forgets what God has done for God's people. Similarly, the psalm tells us what life in community is to be like – we are to be servants of God, because God has freed us from slavery, and so we are to give the sacrifice of thanksgiving together, “in the presence of all God's people.” And Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, reminds the fledgling church that they are to continue to meet and make Eucharist together, to eat and drink at one table as family, to remember the covenant made between Jesus and those he called friends as well as disciples.

And it's good to remember that this commandment is not just for those of us who are participating in this service. We would not have lasted this long as a church if we only served each other. No – we are also called to take this love out into the world, to serve those whom society or the government calls unlovely, unworthy, unfit to be part of the family. What does Jesus say at the very end of our Gospel lesson this evening? “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” On this night of commandments, we must remember that love has to be the lens through which we see the world; through which we make decisions regarding our time, our ministries, our financial support; through which we show the world that no one is unworthy or unfit, no matter where they came from, no matter how they got here, no matter what they look like. When we love others, when we serve others, we not only fulfill the vows we make at Baptism; we show the world and ourselves that we truly follow the two great commandments to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

My friends – my chosen family – every time we gather, we gather in remembrance of Jesus and what he did for us, and we say another “yes” to the ministries to which we are called. In washing and being washed, we are saying “yes” to God and to this community; we are affirming our desire to keep on being ministers to each other and to the world. We are saying “yes” to Jesus' servant ministry of love and healing and blessing and feeding the world. We are renewing our vows to be partners with each other and with Christ, serving Christ by serving each other in this symbolic way. In the words of the hymn, “Brother, sister, let me serve you; let me be as Christ to you. Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.” Let us use the time we have to lay aside our barriers and serve each other thankfully, out of love and respect for each other and for the God who made us, redeemed us, and sustains us.

Amen.