

Thursday, April 2, 2026
Maundy Thursday
John 13.1-17, 31b-35
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Redefining Love”

Here we are. Maundy Thursday. So named because of one particular verse in our Gospel reading for this evening. The term “Maundy” derives from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning “commandment,” reflecting Jesus’ words to his disciples that we just heard: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Jesus goes on to further clarify this simple yet oh so difficult commandment by adding, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Two thousand years later, we might be tempted to look at Jesus’ statement and think this is a no-brainer. Of course we should love one another. After all, the greatest commandments, according to Jesus himself are to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22.37, 39). Although, he did not make this up on his own. His statement is a blending of commandments contained in the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. So, this is nothing new. It has been around for thousands of years. Why then, did Jesus feel a need to give an allegedly new commandment that was really a reiteration of ancient ones? Ancient commandments his disciples, as devout Jews, would have already known.

What better way to renew interest, to cause people to sit up and take notice, than to rebrand and repackage something as “new.” We see it all the time in modern day advertising. Take something old and familiar, make a slight tweak, rebrand it as “new,” and all of a sudden everyone wants it and it starts flying off the shelves. Maybe not quite what Jesus was thinking when he rebranded the commandment to “love one another” as new. But where the analogy does hold is that Jesus was redefining what it means to love one another through his own example. Through the example of his life and ministry, to be sure. But more immediately, through what he modeled at that final gathering, at that last meal, with his disciples the evening before his death.

Standard definitions of Maundy Thursday note that it commemorates two actions: Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and the Last Supper with the disciples. These two actions serving as examples of how Jesus redefines what it means to love one another. Before we delve into those two examples, a quick caveat. While the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—have the institution of the Last Supper as the focus of the Maundy Thursday event, John’s Gospel, which we heard this evening, focuses on the foot washing. John’s Gospel places this in the context of a meal, but otherwise does not focus on the meal per se. More on that later.

But first, the foot washing. This practice was rooted in the hospitality customs of many ancient cultures, particularly where sandals were the primary footwear. Upon arriving at someone’s home, the host would greet guests and either provide water for the guests to wash their own feet, or have a slave wash the guests’ feet. While there was a practical aspect to foot washing—

the washing of dirty feet following a journey—foot washing is not so much about bathing as a symbol of relationship.

In the current story, Jesus is the host of the meal. As host, he is obligated to make provision for the washing of his guests' feet—in this case, those of the disciples. Rather than providing water or having a slave do so, Jesus does the unexpected and places himself in the role of slave, washing his guests' feet himself. In taking this role upon himself, Jesus is demonstrating humble service to those who look to him as their superior. In so doing, he is redefining his relationship with them. Something that is awkward and uncomfortable in the moment. Peter rejects Jesus acting as a slave. To his way of thinking, such a role is "beneath" Jesus. Just four days before, Jesus entered Jerusalem as a messianic king. Washing someone's feet is not what the long-awaited Messiah should be doing. If anything, they should be washing his feet. In insisting on washing Peter's feet, Jesus' point is that such a role is precisely what he, and what all of us, are meant to do in this radical redefining of relationship that Jesus is instituting.

As Jesus says after washing their feet, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." This humble act of service being an egalitarian action. That all are called to humble service of one another, regardless of title or position. And by extension, regardless of other defining characteristics such as gender or race. Even Judas, the one who would betray Jesus—the one whom Jesus already knew would betray him—was included in the foot washing before the meal. An even more powerful indication of the subsequent command to "love one another as I have loved you." A powerful indication that Jesus' redefining of relationship, that Jesus' commandment to love one another, applies to all—believers and non-believers, friends and enemies. That Jesus does not pose limitations on the recipient of his or our love. This act of humble service becoming the model for the future Church as to its mission in and to the world. Jesus commands us to wash one another's feet as a sign of love and care for the other. To experience the power of humility and servant ministry that was the hallmark of his life and ministry.

There is a more far-reaching eschatological meaning to this action, as well. Jesus, in washing the feet of the disciples, is welcoming them into his home, albeit metaphorical in this case. He is just borrowing this space for this one meal. However, Jesus is not just welcoming them into the space where this last supper is being held. Given what Jesus knows will be happening the next day and following, this welcoming of the disciples takes on a new meaning. This action itself a foreshadowing of the eternal life promised through Jesus' death and resurrection, where all will eventually be welcomed into his eternal home, into God's heavenly realm. In fact, in the next chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus expresses this redefined meaning when he says, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (Jn 14.2). Perhaps one of the most popular Gospel passages for funeral services, as it provides comfort and assurance that we are all welcomed into God's heavenly realm when our time on this earth is completed.

The simple act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet carries so much meaning for them and for the Church they would be called to lead. For we who continue their legacy as those called to

engage in humble servant ministry that defines the work of the Church founded on Jesus' commandment that we love one another just as he has loved us.

What about the Last Supper, the other event typically associated with Maundy Thursday? Our Gospel reading today is silent on that subject. While the Synoptics each have a definitive institution of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, there is no such mention in John's Gospel. John does mention a final meal with Jesus and his disciples, but that's about it. Nothing explicitly sacramental. And even this is significant. Particularly as related to Jesus' redefining relationship. For in John's Gospel, Jesus' entire life and ministry, rather than a particular event at the end of his life, institutes the sacrament of the Eucharist. In John's Gospel, the sacrament of Eucharist is inherent to who Jesus is, as characterized by his "I am" statements. Particularly "I am the bread of life." In John's Christology, to share in the eucharistic meal is not to commemorate a particular event, but is to share in the entirety of Jesus' life. Redefining who we are as those who follow him. Redefining our relationship with him. In the act of taking communion, we are literally in communion with him. Through the bread and wine, through ingesting his Body and Blood, Jesus literally becomes a part of us. And we become part of him as the Body of Christ in the world.

The first Passover meal prepared the Hebrews for the Exodus, for their journey in the wilderness to the Promised Land, whereby their relationship with God was redefined. Whereby they were made into God's Chosen People. Jesus' last meal with his disciples—also a Passover meal—was similarly a preparing them and us for a journey—a journey Jesus would take through his death and resurrection, whereby our relationship with him is redefined. With the Last Supper, the Eucharistic meal, being a foretaste of resurrection and new life, of new relationship, with him.

The two actions we recall, that we participate in, this night, profoundly redefine our relationship with Jesus. The foot washing being a sign of the humble service he lived, the humble service to which we are called as his followers, as those who minister in his name. The Last Supper, being a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, whereby we partake of his Body and Blood, making him a part of who we are, nourishing us for the humble service to which we are called in his name. Both actions at once transforming and signifying our redefined relationship as the Body of Christ.

As we heard at the beginning of our Gospel reading: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." "To the end" meaning both the end of his life, as well as to the utmost—to the greatest extent possible. He loved them, and us, to the end. Through the redefining actions of Maundy Thursday, through the tragedy of Good Friday, through the glory of Easter, and beyond.