

Maundy Thursday

March 29, 2018

Church of the Advent

All or Nothing

This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Tonight we come together to read from our scriptures, to say our prayers and to set our table for the Lord's Supper. We gather just as the disciples did with Jesus on that night before he was betrayed—to remember the Passover of the Lord, as the Lord has commanded us—an event central to the identity of God's people. And we remember the institution of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist at the Passover meal Jesus shared with those closest to him on the night before he died, the night he commanded them to love one another.

This holy day of remembrance is framed by the night that God helped Moses lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. Moses had been in a wrestling match with the Pharaoh, and from the hand of God, Moses had brought plagues of illness, frogs, locusts, and all manner of calamity on the Egyptians—none of which had moved the Pharaoh to let God's people go. But something *really* terrible was coming next, and the Israelites needed to be quickly ready to escape the Egyptians, and to escape the wrath of God that was coming to strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt—human and animal—a plague so awful that it would make Pharaoh want the Israelites out of his kingdom and his life for good. The Israelite's new life of freedom was bought with a terrible price—something they probably little understood at the time—busy as they were following the instructions from Moses to kill and roast a whole lamb, to smear its blood on the doorpost, and to eat every bit of it standing up, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, in a hurry, dressed with their sandals on, and ready to hit the road. They barely had time to catch their breath, much less process what this night would come to mean to them. Exodus not only describes the drama of the first Passover night—when God spared the firstborn

of the Israelites while those of their Egyptian neighbors died; it also describes God's command to the people to commemorate and celebrate the Passover event every year going forward.

Honoring God's command, Jewish Law, and the trials of their ancestors, Jesus and his disciples gathered to celebrate the Passover with the traditional commemorative meal. That year's festival for them was not to be like any other they had celebrated in their lives—and it would prove to be the last meal they would share with Jesus until after the Resurrection. Jesus knew that the time to fulfill his earthly destiny was coming—that his death was coming. He had already taught the disciples almost everything they would need to know to carry on without him; there would not be another opportunity to prepare beyond this night. He was almost to that place where all that could *be done had been done*, and this scene of their last supper together was a kind of farewell dinner, though Jesus was the only one—besides Judas who was about to betray him—who understood that he would soon be gone. With the weight of this knowledge, Jesus expressed his love for his friends, his gratitude to them for their faithfulness, and his tenderness for the hard road of sacrifice they would each know after his passing from the world.

Very much in the way we have through the ages borrowed from more than one gospel to craft our story of the birth of Jesus, we have through the ages borrowed from more than one gospel to craft our story of Maundy Thursday. From the Latin *mandatum*, Maundy means *mandate* or *command*. It is in the gospel of Luke that we hear Jesus say:

‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, ‘Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, *This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*

Not just a suggestion, but a command: *Do this in remembrance of me.*

But it is *only* in the gospel of John, that Jesus—seeming to have little consideration for the meal—and *having loved his own who were in the world, loving them to the end*, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a

basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. What a powerful way to show his love for them, to take on the job of a servant, washing away the dirt, the weariness, and the stress of the long road they had been on together, preparing them for the longer road still ahead of them. Before Jesus gave his disciples the *mandatum, to love one another*, he showed them what kind of love he was talking about. This was a love that went way beyond warm and fuzzy, way beyond common courtesy, or being nice to someone to make them feel good about themselves. This was a love that was about *sacrifice*—about being willing to go to the wall—even to death—for those who would not necessarily do the same in return. This was about loving the one who had already betrayed his trust, as well as the ones who would abandon him in a heartbeat that very night, when the going got rough, their personal risk was high, and fear overcame loyalty. This was a love that, as I heard another preacher call it, was unconventional, uncomfortable and inconvenient. Because ultimately no one ever really *deserves* this kind of love; it is impossible to be worthy of it—to earn it. It is not reciprocal. It is not transactional. It is not measurable. It is barely fathomable. And yet is the love of Jesus, our Lord and Savior—who was not only willing to be humiliated, tortured and killed, but was willing to prepare himself by spending his last night on earth as a servant.

The saving grace in this disturbing scene of the Lord of Heaven kneeling down to wash the feet of the people of the earth, is—of course—Peter. The one whose heart was always in his mouth and way ahead of his brain. Peter objects, and we identify with his resistance to this unconventional and uncomfortable act of Jesus. Peter *wants* to please Jesus—you just know he does—but he just can't help himself shrinking away from allowing his Rabbi, his Teacher, to place himself in such a low estate as to handle his feet. It just wasn't right.

Our feet do much of our dirty work as they carry us where we need to go. They connect us to the earth, becoming the barrier to the filthy places we walk every day. We might wash our hands many times a day—especially if we are working in health care or with young children—but our feet are pretty much left on their own until they carry us into the shower at home. Only a Podiatrist could love feet—with their afflictions of callouses, ingrown nails, bunions, Morton's neuromas and plantar fasciitis. Our dirty shoes pile up everywhere—near the door, on the porch,

under the sofa, in the closet, but never on the table or counter or chair—because shoes are the only thing dirtier than our feet. And our smelly, sweaty socks do little to recommend our feet. There are customs in some cultures that are thousands of years old that demand that anyone entering a home or a place of worship remove his or her shoes and leave them outside before entering. In some places the guest is even given a new “inside” pair of shoes to wear while visiting. Because feet are after all, well—feet.

So *right on, Peter*, we think—not *my* feet. No Jesus, you will not love me that way! I’ll take the Hallmark card, thank you very much, because I don’t want any of that radical love that I have not earned; it might leave me in some kind of debt; it might make me change my life. It might require me to love one someone else that unconventionally, that uncomfortably, that inconveniently. You will never wash my feet!

And just as shocking as Peter’s refusal comes the ultimatum from Jesus that makes him change his mind. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” It was as if Jesus was saying that for us to be *all in* with him, we have to accept his servanthood, his sacrifice, his soon to be public death, his fulfillment of his Father’s will, his uncomfortable, inconvenient, unconventional, unconditional love. *All or nothing*. And Peter did the only thing any of us could have done, he said, “Lord not only my feet but also my hands and my head.” Peter, who did not know himself well enough to realize he would be denying his Lord in a matter of hours, accepted all that love—that he did not earn, that he did not deserve, and that would not make him a perfect person, but *would* change his life forever. And that love was showered over him and his dirty feet, and the bread was broken, and the Passover was blessed, as God so loved the world.

So tonight, whether called to bring your feet forward to be washed, or to bathe this place in your prayers, we remember the Passover of the Lord, knowing we have been saved by the blood of the lamb, that we have been fed by the bread of heaven, and that we are washed in love—unconventional, inconvenient, uncomfortable, and unconditional love—to carry us forward, and to follow our Savior’s command to love one another. AMEN