

“Love One Another, as I Have Loved You”

Maundy Thursday 2021

John 13:1-17; 34-35

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Tonight, we gather on what has become known as “Maundy” Thursday. That strange word—*maundy* (not *Monday*, but *maundy*)—derives from the Latin, *mandatum*, meaning “mandate” or “commandment,” and we use the word because it is on this night that we commemorate when Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, *Love one another as I have loved you*.

Love one another as I have loved you. It rolls off the tongue easily. Who’s against love? Love sounds right and good. We like love like we like sunsets and rainbows. Of course, we’ll follow Jesus on this one. Of course, we’ll love others.

But I wonder—

If we are to love as Jesus loved, are we really up for it? Jesus leads us into deeper relationship with our neighbor; do we really want to get to know our neighbor, serve our neighbor, help our neighbor, put up with our neighbor? If we are supposed to love our neighbor, that suggests we are supposed to meaningfully engage with our neighbor—both next door and in Cuba and Pakistan and Indonesia and at the Mexican border and in Kinshasha and in the prison and the Phoenix Center and on campus and down-state and . . .

The pandemic has intensified our isolation, has made our neighbor appear more distant. Frederick Buechner has said, and this last year proves it, **“You can survive on your own; you can grow strong on your own; you can prevail on your own; but you cannot become human on your own.”** That is to say, *we need each other*. God intended for us to celebrate our interconnectedness. We need the water and the air, the trees and the desert, the light and the dark, song birds and, apparently, mosquitos. It’s all part of the same ecosystem, the same glorious life. We need each other and we need to take care of our world and everybody in it. That means we must come out of our isolation, we need to send some emails, join a Zoom group, take a socially distanced walk with the lady down the street. We need to step out of ourselves, because our humanity depends on it.

Love one another as I have loved you.

Are we ready?

Are we ready for that? Jesus’ friendship with the world can be characterized as always reaching out. He drew people together, he drew them out of their isolation, he drew them into community. Jesus noticed people who were different. Jesus made it a point to lift up the lowly, to take in the outcast, to welcome the unwelcomed, to incorporate the disenfranchised, to listen to the ignored, to celebrate the forgotten. Do we want to be this kind of neighbor to the whole wide world?

Jesus was the kind of neighbor who stood up to and faced down systems of injustice for the good of the wider human family. He turned over the tables in the temple when the business of worship complicated the practice of worship. He worked to demolish the walls people had built to separate and segregate. He, a Jewish rabbi, had no trouble approaching the Samaritan woman.

Are we willing to approach the Samaritan woman? Are we willing to step across the dividing lines that pit side-against-side-against-side, the white from the brown, the democrat from the republican, the old from the young, the liberal from the conservative, the gay from the straight, the east coast from the west coast, the homeless from the housed, the proper from the disarranged, the tangled from the estranged, the townie from the county? Are we willing to be curious about and hospitable toward the stranger, the foreigner, the woman with the accent, the man in the wheelchair?

Yes.

Yes. It seemed the disciples were willing. When given opportunities to serve, they don't blink. (On Friday of this week, they will change their tune.)

They had walked with Jesus a long time. They had stuck with him. They had grown. Their minds had expanded. Their views deepened. They not only were willing to do it his way, they wanted to do it his way. His way was God's way. It made sense. They felt God's love and they wanted to live that love, and to celebrate that love, and to share that love. Yes, yes, yes.

Yes, they were willing to be Jesus' disciples in the world. Yes.

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John writes this scene like a film maker: *Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself, poured water into a basin and began to*

wash

the disciples'

feet

...

His words become actions, bold actions. You could have heard a pin drop. What Jesus is saying without saying a word is that *if you are willing to love the world, this is what loving the world looks like.*

But Peter, like many of us, perhaps, badly misunderstands this scene. (Or, he gets only part of it.)

Jesus was Peter's master, and Peter was not going to let his master wash his dirty feet.

But that's Jesus' point, isn't it? This kind of radical service isn't below anybody. Even masters wash their servants' feet in the Kin-dom of God. Bosses serve the lowliest employee. The fat cat helps the homeless man. The prim and proper lady collects the neighbor's branches after the storm. The research assistant with a modest income writes a big check to her sister church in Cuba.

Peter surely understands that, yes, we are supposed to serve each other. Peter certainly understands that, yes, Jesus is our master. What Peter appears not to understand, however, is that rank is not part of Jesus' equation. Status doesn't matter. So, yes, indeed, the master is supposed to kneel and wash the feet of, in this case, his students. His disciples. His friends.

Jesus tells Peter, *Unless you let me wash you, you have no share in me.*

Do you hear that long, thunderous silence between the end of verse eight and the beginning of verse nine? The light is going on in Peter's head. Jesus is serious about loving the world by humbly serving everybody in it.

Peter asks himself in this momentous pause, *Should the son of God wash my feet?*

Jesus wouldn't have it any other way.

Peter finally gets it, and in a scene ripples to new life with warmth and humor, Peter says *Wash everything, LORD!*

* * *

Jesus has put words into action. His disciples understand and appear to be willing. If you're going to love the world, you're going to love the world on your knees, serving your neighbor.

Tonight, Jesus reaches out his arms to wash and dry his disciples' feet. Tomorrow night, Jesus reaches out his arms upon a cross—loving the world, no matter the cost.

Even now these words still echo through the ages:

Love one another as I have loved you.

For the gift of this holy, wondrous love—*thanks be to God.*

And for Christ's call to us to live and share this love—*may God help us.*

AMEN.