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Holy Thursday, April 9, 2020/Year A

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14

Gospel Reading: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Sermon Title: “My Example; My Command”

Theme

The story of the last supper in John’s gospel recalls a remarkable event not mentioned elsewhere: Jesus performs the duty of a slave, washing the feet of his disciples and urging them to do the same for one another.

Text

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

^{31b}“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Sermon

"We've never done it like this before!" How many times have I said or thought those words these last few weeks? It applies again to this evening.

As I said in the introduction a few moments ago, in my opinion, Holy Thursday, as we have taken to calling it, is the holiest day on the church calendar. And I come to that conclusion because traditionally, *we* commemorate the night that Jesus Christ our Lord instituted the Lord's Supper, which is so powerfully important to Lutherans specifically.

Oddly, the Gospel of John, barely mentions that the setting for the reading was a meal, let alone one that we would recognize as the one in which Jesus instituted that we do 'as often as we gather in remembrance of him.' And yet it is this reading, John 13, that we hear every Holy Thursday.

This night is known by another name that many of us will remember; *Maundy* Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word, *mandatum*, which translated means, "command". The reason this evening's commemoration gets that name is that on *this* night Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, that they love one another. He said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"

Because the institution of the Lord's Supper is so important to us, it has been *my* tradition to read Paul's rendering of the Lord's Supper from 1 Corinthians as the Eucharistic Prayer. But with no church gathered here to take part in Holy Communion, I will take this opportunity to focus on two other important actions that Jesus took that I don't usually say much about. Those two actions are what is at the heart of the reading anyway; those actions being foot-washing and the giving of "the new commandment."

On this, my 22nd Holy Thursday service I have presided at, I have a confession to make. In all those years, I have never washed anyone's feet. It's true! I did it a couple of times in seminary. I did it on internship. At both locations, we had to coerce people in advance to come forward and do it. You the members of the congregation are uncomfortable with it, and your discomfort makes me uncomfortable, so why would I add to our discomfort? Attendance is usually not very good at Holy Thursday and Good Friday services. What I hear people say is

that the services themselves make them uncomfortable. So announcing that I am going to wash your feet would really cut down attendance!

The story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples only occurs in John's Gospel so it makes a perfect inclusion to our series, "Journey with Jesus Through John." As you know, the setting was the Passover Seder, the ritual meal that all faithful Jews celebrate that commemorates the night that the Spirit of the LORD *passed over* the households of faithful Hebrews whose doorposts were marked by the blood of the lamb.

This is how God delivered the Hebrew people from their slavery to the Egyptians. God told them that they were to remember this event annually so that they would not forget the great and mighty acts that God had performed for them. And so, this is where we find Jesus and the Twelve in the Gospel Reading.

As you heard in the Gospel Reading, on this night, in the middle of the traditional Seder, Jesus

⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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 an odd gesture, the uninformed listener might be thinking, but in First Century Palestine, it was a hospitable gesture for the slave or the lowest person in the household to wash the feet of guests. Most peasant Jews had to walk the dusty roads of Palestine to get from place to place, and so this act was not only practical but also a customary sign of hospitality.

But to have Jesus, the disciple's Lord do it? Unthinkable! And that was what was behind the difficult conversation between Jesus and Peter.

So much could be said about the symbolism and meaning of Jesus' action, but suffice it to say that when he was done, he went on to ask,

“Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I

tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

Allow me to highlight just a couple of pieces of what Jesus said and did:

No, it is *not* customary, *not* traditional; it *is* weird and downright uncomfortable that the most respected one of any assembly serves the rest. It's that way in our society too unless one is running for public office, then there are photo ops galore. But Jesus upset the customs and traditions of his day and even our day.

Jesus said, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Not only did Jesus dispense with the old customs and traditions, but he instituted another. No, not foot-washing; well, yes and no. There is no indication that the disciples actually did what Jesus asked them to do – wash each other's feet. Washing the feet of his disciples was symbolic of how he instituted a new custom and tradition, that of his disciples loving one another by serving one another. And about this new custom and tradition of serving one another, Jesus said, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

The lection jumps forward a bit to verse 31b and following, where Jesus said, 'Its time for me to go save the world from itself. It will do no good for you to try to help me with this. This is something only I can do. I have taught you everything you need to know to continue without me. But I have one last thing to teach you, one last commandment to give you:

love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

According to John, Jesus went on a bit longer, but eventually, he led the Twelve to the Garden of Gethsemane where he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, into the hands of a detachment of Roman soldiers and Temple police sent by the Sanhedrin.

Overnight he was interrogated and beaten half to death, sent before Pilate, traded off for a known criminal and insurrectionist, found guilty in a mockery of justice,

and sentenced to death by crucifixion, a particularly brutal method of capital punishment reserved for the worst criminals.

Much later, the disciples would remember that he said,

“Do you know what I have done to you? I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Raisin’ the Bar Challenge

Wow! What an example! Did he really mean that we, his modern-day disciples, are to love one another? Even to death?

What an important question, and especially appropriate at this time as we find ourselves in the fight of our lives against this common enemy, COVID-19.

I cannot answer the question for you.

Medical experts say that we can "flatten the curve" by staying in our homes and out of the public. By doing so we lessen the number of people creating demands on our nation's medical infrastructure. So, if staying inside is the most loving thing we can do for one another, then that is what we should do.

Last week, many of us turned out to safely give blood in response to the nationwide blood shortage. That also was a loving thing to do.

Some are safely offering assistance to their elderly neighbors, running out for necessary groceries and prescriptions. That also is a loving thing to do.

At one point in the conversation, Peter took issue with his Lord washing his feet, to which Jesus responded, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Jesus' way of saying, discipleship in him necessarily means that his ways eclipse our ways. Doing nothing seems not to be an option.

So where we find ourselves on our "Journey with Jesus Through John" this evening is at the table of the Lord. His journey is almost over. What he must do from here,

he must do alone. All we can do is observe him. I encourage you all to come back tomorrow, Good Friday at 3:00 PM or after for the conclusion of his Passion.

Jesus does not ask us to die for him or for another, as noble as that may seem. He commands us to live for him, by loving and serving one another. By this, others will know that we are his disciples, and others may come to know him too.

Prayer

Holy Father, on this night we celebrate the continuation of the greatest demonstration of your love that the world has ever known. Send us your Holy Spirit so that we are inspired to more diligently and more intentionally shape our lives according to the example and command of Jesus Christ, our Lord. It is in his holy name we pray. Amen