

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

*Now 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. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus 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." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."
After 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? 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.
"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little 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.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. 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."*

(In the name God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.)

This has been the strangest Holy Week I've ever experienced. I'm sure I'm not alone in this. We've all had to give up a lot of church traditions and ways of doing things since this physical distancing requirement began. Many of those things we do as church are memorialized on this day. Maundy Thursday.

Normally we gather. Normally we share a meal and remember this night. We remember the last supper and Jesus' special meal with his disciples. We prepare for Good Friday by reverentially putting away all the beautiful church things in the sanctuary: the paraments, the frontals, the cushions, the candlesticks. All the decorations and fillings of church get slowly removed. The altar is reverentially washed and oiled at the corners and the center.

It's a night when we remember Jesus, and we also remember church. I've spent this week re-writing liturgies that the church has used unchanged since 1979. That feels very strange. And today, I spent hours writing sermons for you. For tonight, I actually wrote about ½ to ¾ of around 6 different sermons. None of them went anywhere. It's like they were missing something at their core. Sometimes that happens to me, but not for this long. I felt like those dry bones we talked about on Palm Sunday.

I've learned from older priests that the key to times like this is to step back and pray. Step away from the business of the church job and remember why church exists in the first place. Remember why it is that I do what I do, and why we do what we do, and remember who we're all doing it for.

It's the same for us in life right now. The sermons I would have preached to you were all trying to show you something. They were trying to teach you something, to explain something, to give you fresh insight into something. They all went forwards, and deeper.

So this afternoon around 5 p.m., I put them all down and decided to just talk to you about tonight's Gospel from John. I was focusing on the middle of the passage. All the information is there about where they were, who was there, when it happened, what they were doing, how they did it, and why. All the church stuff is there in this Maundy Thursday Last Supper. Christ's body is there, in person, and in bread and wine. Judas, the betrayer is there, and we peer into his heart. Water is poured into a basin, reminiscent of our baptismal services. Cleansing is there. The Eucharist is there. The footwashing is there. The table is there. All the church things.

And those are all the things that I'm missing right now. So what's God doing in all this? I wondered.

We've given up a lot of things in our lives. I've listed them before. I know each of you has your own list, and your own awareness. People I know are beginning to lose friends and loved ones. Where's God in all this? What's God teaching us when our routines are taken away, our lives are disrupted, and we're faced with the reality that people die. We can be forgiven for wanting to skip over Holy Week this year. It still feels like Lent. People are joking that it'll still feel like Lent even in Easter. It's the Lentiest Lent we've ever Lented.

Don't skip over Maundy Thursday and Good Friday because you want Easter to get here. Tonight is Jesus' last night on earth as a human being. Look at his example and learn. The gospel tonight, in the middle, teaches us all about church. There's Peter, our patron saint, on whom the church is founded. There's Jesus. There's the table, and the meal, and the holy spirit, the bread and the wine, the servant ministry of footwashing, the pouring out of water. All the things that make up church. All the doing things and the rituals, and the remembrances.

What we're learning this week is that all those things aren't church. Jesus showed and did all those things as a way of teaching us. But they were examples. They were rituals and things to do to help point us to the truth of God. But they are not that truth, and they are not God. They're tools and things that aid us.

The gospel reading actually tells us this in its basic structure if we look at it and stake a step back. The beginning and the end of the reading tell us why the middle is there. John tells us. Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world loved them to the end. Another translation is that he loved them "to perfection." That word, the Greek word, is key to the whole understanding. Jesus loved them. To the end of his life and to the perfection of his ability to love. That's why all the church stuff was instituted.

He says it again at the end. He leaves us with a new commandment. This is where the name of tonight comes from. It's Christ's mandate to his disciples. Maundy comes from the word Mandate. It isn't a day. It's not Maunday Thursday. It's Maundy. The day of the mandate. And that mandate, so important that we name a day of Holy Week after it, and institute so many of our church rituals around it, that mandate is that we love one another, just as Christ loved us, we also should love one another. By this everyone will know we are his disciples.

They won't know us by our buildings. Nor by the success of our investments. Nor by our beautiful paraments, or altars, or candles, or cushions, or Eucharists, or footwashings, or baptisms. All that stuff is nothing without the love at the core. Without the love, all these actions are simply actions. They are not what we should be attached to. We grieve the loss of the things we used to do as church, and the way we've always done them. But we haven't lost our ability to love one another. It's that love that brought Jesus and the church through the difficult times, the horror of crucifixion and the fear of death. Nothing was more important than love, and Jesus perfected it until the end.

So go back into your own lives and spend some time with this night. Don't skip over it in a rush and longing for the release of Easter. This night is valuable. Not for instituting the last supper. Not for instituting servant ministry. Not for the waters of baptism, or the bread and wine of Eucharist. Step back from life. Remember the things that are important. Remember why it is we do what we do. And remember to tell the people in your lives how much you love them. If the old ways of embodying and enacting love don't work right now, find new ones. Call each other. Check on someone you haven't heard from in a long time. Write notes. Pray for each other. Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are disciples of Christ, if you have love for one another.

Amen.