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“A New Commandment”
John 13:1-17; 34-35

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 13:1-17

On Palm Sunday we saw Jesus send two disciples in to town to find a burro for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem. In Luke’s telling of what happened that night Jesus sent two disciples into town to find the place where Jesus and his disciples could share in the Passover meal. Hear the word of the Lord from John’s perspective that gives us some details of what happened that neither Matthew, Mark or Luke shared from John 13:1-17

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

¹² 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? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants ^[d] are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

One thing I’ve always wondered is: Why do we call it a Foot Washing? Do we only do one? (When my mom lost a foot to diabetes I kidded her that she was the only one who qualified for a Foot washing)

Let me share with you a few things about this practice of “feet washing.” First of all, because of the hot dry climate of Palestine, almost all of the people wore sandals. Sandals were cooler and they certainly were cheaper because it takes less leather to make a sandal than a full shoe. Because of the dusty roads, when a person traveled from house to house his feet would get dusty, but because of the long flowing robes, little else would. So, when guests came over for dinner, one of the things that needed

to be done to prepare for the meal was to wash the feet of those who had traveled to one's home. This was especially needed because of the way people were seated at table. The table around which the disciples gathered was only about a foot high, and shaped in the form of a U. Those gathered for the meal reclined on their left elbows and ate with their right hands making one person's feet near another person's head. With dirty feet this could be unappetizing to say the least.

Ordinarily, on such an occasion the host would have designated a servant to the menial task of removing the sandals of the guests and washing their feet. Since the meeting was obviously intended to be secret however, no servants were present. If there were no servants present, the task of washing the feet of the dinner guests was reserved for the person who occupied the lowest station in life of the assembled group. None of the disciples were ready to volunteer for such a task, for each would have considered it an admission of inferiority to all the others. They were too proud to be humbled.

Jesus was patient. He waited. He even let them start the meal. But when it became evident that none of the disciples were going to volunteer for the task, while they were still eating Jesus rose, removed his outer cloak, tied a towel around his waist, and began to perform the work reserved for servants. For the disciples to have their teacher wash their feet must have been agonizing. The first few dared not speak out, for they were either ashamed of their own reluctance or stunned that their teacher would stoop to do it.

Finally, when Jesus knelt before Peter, he had the boldness to say what the others were surely thinking, "Lord you must never wash my feet!" He was too humble to be humbled.

Many today have the opposite problem. Like the other disciples they are too proud to be humbled. They are such great achievers, eager to work their own way up to heaven. For them to receive a free gift that they can't earn is an insult. If you ask them to do something hard they might do that, but to accept a free gift of grace is too easy. Then they would have nothing of which to be proud!

Jesus was the perfect teacher. This encounter with his disciples this night shows however that his disciples were less than perfect students. Throughout the gospels the disciples did not understand what Jesus said and did. Even on this their last night together they really didn't have any idea what Jesus was doing. I don't know about you, but I find comfort in that. If those who spent the most time with him and saw first-hand the miracles and still didn't understand, I don't feel so bad when I don't understand. This is about servanthood. It is an illustration of the kingdom of God and who is the greatest in it. If you want to be great in God's kingdom, learn to be the servant of all.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow of Princeton University has explored how it is that people make everyday ethical decisions. Many people, he found, perform deeds of compassion, service, and mercy because at some point in their past someone acted with compassion toward them. He wrote, "The caring we receive may touch us so deeply that we feel especially gratified when we are able to pass it on to someone else."

He tells the story of Jack Casey, who was employed as an emergency worker on an ambulance rescue squad. When Jack was a child, he had oral surgery. Five teeth were to be pulled under general anesthetic, and Jack was fearful. What he remembers most, though, was the operating room nurse who, sensing the boy's terror, said, "Don't worry, I'll be right here beside you no matter what happens." When Jack woke up after the surgery, she was true to her word, standing right there with him.

Nearly 20 years later, Jack's ambulance team is called to the scene of a highway accident. A truck has overturned, the driver is pinned in the cab and power tools are necessary to get him out. However, gasoline is dripping onto the driver's clothes, and one spark from the tools could have spelled disaster. The driver is terrified, crying out that he is scared of dying. So, Jack crawls into the cab next to him and says, "Look, don't worry, I'm right here with you; I'm not going anywhere." And Jack was true to his word; he stayed with the man until he was safely removed from the wreckage.

Later the truck driver told Jack, "You were an idiot; you know that the whole thing could have exploded, and we'd have both been burned up!" Jack told him that he felt that he just couldn't leave him.

Many years before, Jack had been treated compassionately by the nurse, and because of that experience, he could now show that same compassion to another. Receiving grace enabled him to give grace. Jesus said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet." 1

My friend Karen Aarons is a wonderful pianist, and piano teacher in Baytown. She is the daughter of a holocaust survivor who spoke at our church the year when we hosted the first Holocaust March of Remembrance. Karen is the lay leader at the Congregation Israel Kneseth in Baytown. She sent me a text wishing me a Happy Easter. She wrote, May this Holy Week be filled with many blessings for you all! Take care and God Bless! I wrote back and wished her a Pesach Samach. (Blessed Passover).

It reminded me of a conversation I had with her about the timing of the Passover Seders. She said that the Jewish festivals are celebrated according to the lunar calendar. That's why they do not occur on fixed dates. That's why our celebration of Holy Week moves as well.

Karen said that the celebration of Passover usually last 8 days. The celebration of the Seder meal can take place any time during that week. She said some orthodox families

celebrate the Seder as many as 3 times during that week, on the first night and the second night and then on the last night. I asked her about the sequence of the meal. She said that there are ceremonial prayers and partaking of the specified items like the shank bone of the lamb and bitter herbs and unleavened bread and salt water and two cups of wine that are shared at the beginning of the meal. Then the participants have a full meal which is ended with two more cups of wine and more prayers.

What does this mean? It means that it was after the ceremonial beginning of the Passover meal and in the middle of the meal proper that Jesus rose to stoop to wash his disciple's feet. It means that after washing their feet they returned to eating until they finished their meal. It means that at the end of their meal they shared the last two ceremonial cups of wine. It means that after those last two cups Jesus took some bread and a fifth cup of wine adding a NEW ceremony. Jesus broke tradition with the breaking of the bread and the taking of the fifth cup of wine in order to start a new tradition—one which we remember tonight.. Through their Passover Seder they had just remembered the Old Covenant and the Old deliverance from slavery. Now Jesus institutes a New Covenant with a New Commandment.

After they finished the meal they sang a hymn and went out. In verses 31-35 Jesus gave them the words to go with this new tradition. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you. By this will all know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another" John 13:34-35.

"Most scholars agree that the English word "Maundy" is derived through Middle English and Old French mandé, from the Latin mandatum which is the first word of the phrase "Mandatum novum" –a New Mandate, a New Commandment. That's why we call this Thursday "Maundy Thursday."

The Lord's command is not that we LIKE one another. That certainly would be nice, but to like or not to like is rooted in our emotions, and emotions do not respond to commands. The love of which Jesus speaks is NOT an emotion. It is a way of acting toward one another that says, "No matter what, I want GOOD for you, and I will do whatever I can to insure that you get it." Christian love is not something the Lord wants us to FEEL for one another but rather something he wants us to DO for one another.

As to how this love should be measured, our standard comes from the clause, "as I have loved you." That is a broad and lofty standard indeed! The love that Jesus had for his disciples began with a willingness to ignore the limits of society. He did not content himself with a little group made up of only his "own kind" - he reached out to ALL kinds, and especially to those whom the rest of the world would shun. The love of Jesus enabled him to take on tasks that would have been thought to be beneath him - servant work like washing dusty feet, for example. The love of Jesus was able to encompass the hypocrisy of Peter, the self-serving ambition of James and John, the unbelief of Thomas, the betrayal of Judas. It was a love that knew no limit. He loved them so much that he was willing to die for them. That became our standard for obedience. "As I have

loved you...so you must love one another."

We have cheapened love by using the word carelessly. We have confused the sentimentality of the Hallmark card with the deep, dark mystery of love that is manifested for us in the incarnate Christ. Yes, love can be warm, enfolding and sheltering. Yes, love can feel good. But love can also be strong and difficult. It can be an impossible challenge.²

What else does this mean? It means that after a night-time trial which ended in a morning sentencing and scourging and crucifixion that Jesus was being killed at the same time that the Passover lambs were being slain all over the city. It means that after having slain the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, some Hebrew families were sitting down to eat the lamb of Passover that reminded them of the lambs that were slain to save the lives of the first born sons of Israel when the angel of death passed over the homes marked with the blood of the lamb on their doorpost. It means that when Jesus was placed in the tomb before sundown, Hebrew families gathered around tables all over that city to celebrate the Seder, remembering the Exodus and God's great deliverance from the hand of Pharaoh brought by avoiding the angel of death, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world would lay dead, wrapped in a linen shroud in a borrowed tomb.

I want to close with a poem in 4 parts. It was written by a seminary classmate of mine Darrell Cluck. I will read another part of it at each of the next 3 services.

God borrowed a body to become one with us.
On a borrowed beast he rode to a borrowed room
Where he broke the borrowed bread and served the borrowed wine
Borrowing condemnation from ones on borrowed time.

- 1) CSS Publishing Company, Taking the Risk Out of Dying, by Lee Griess
- 2) "No Exceptions Permitted," article in The Christian Century, May 3, 1995, by Margaret Guenther

Let's pray. Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them. Write this commandment in our hearts. Give us the will to serve others as he was the servant of all. Wash us from the stain of sin, so that, in hours of danger, we may not fail, but

follow your son through every trial and praise him always as Lord and Christ to whom be glory now and forever.

Lord, we pray that we might never forget the scene lived out that night. When we are tempted to think more of ourselves than we ought, flash before our minds the incredible scene that night of you stooping to wash the dust from the feet of those you loved.

We pray for those who are in deep need this night--for those whose pride stands in the way of them being in relationship with you. We pray for those who once were close but now have drifted far away, for those who even have gone so far as to betray you to others or deny knowing you, or run so far away that no one even think them to accuse them of ever having known you.

We pray for those that know you intimately but still are in need. We pray for those who are battling illness, fighting for recovery, trying to overcome addictions, surrounded by loneliness, aching from grief. Surround, comfort, heal, and sustain those who have leapt to our minds in this moment of prayer. Send your Holy Spirit to work you will in their lives in Jesus name.

Lord, as we soon come to the table in remembrance of the night in which you were betrayed, help us to so come in the right spirit and frame of mind. Don't let tonight be just another rote experience but make it special. Break the pride in us that keeps us in control and wrests control from you. Humble us in the same way you humbled your disciples by stooping to do what neither they could, nor can we imagine ourselves doing. Move us to doing the unimaginable that our mission might be fulfilled and your will might be done on earth as it is done in heaven. This we pray in Jesus name, Amen.

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