

Maundy Thursday 14 April 2022

Exodus 12:1-4,5-10,11-14 / Psalm 116 / 1Corinthians 11:23-26 / John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Our Lenten journey is over now; we have officially entered the Three Days of Jesus' passion: Thursday when he institutes the Last Supper and gives the disciples a new commandment to love one another before being arrested; Friday when he is crucified; and Saturday when the Easter Vigil that begins after sundown announces Jesus' resurrection from death into new life.

The events of these days are at the heart of our faith and bring some of the richest liturgy and worship in our denomination. Yes, there are long readings – this evening, surrounding the absolution of sins and foot-washing; tomorrow the bidding prayer alongside the heartbreak of Good Friday; on Saturday the wonderful but lengthy readings of the Easter Vigil. But here we also see again the core of our beliefs and how we live as Christians.

Tonight is a real night about physicality. Jesus washes the disciples' feet to demonstrate how we are called to give and receive love in service to one another. And we are formed into a new body in Christ through the holy last meal he shares with those disciples. So that we may be transformed by the mercy we receive and carry it into the world.

Peter asks Jesus, “Are you going to wash my feet?” As if to say, “*Really?*” Many congregations are uncomfortable with the idea of washing each others’ feet on this day; they may have tried it once and said, no thanks, we won’t be doing that again. Some of us may think our feet are ugly. For sure they’ve seen better days! They’ve put on a lot of mileage and it shows – these feet compared to Morgan’s feet are like from two different species.

And at the same time, our feet are sensitive, too. The skin on the bottom is so delicate. Stubbing your toe can hurt so incredibly much! Feet are so ticklish! Maybe overall, our feet could be described as truly knowing where we’ve been and what we’ve lived through, in a way perhaps no other person does.

That could be why we’re so uncomfortable with the idea of showing our feet, or our hearts, or any other vulnerable part of ourselves, to another person. It would involve taking down the barriers we surround ourselves with, to protect us from what we imagine people might think of us if they really saw all of us. Just look at all our wounds and scars, misshapen toes, nails that need clipping, toe gunk. Who could see that and still love us?

That’s how foot-washing brings us closer to what it means to love each other the way Jesus loves us.

In Saint John's Gospel Jesus performs this intimate act which is an unusual display of service, and maybe even servitude. Jesus shows that discipleship is about service, about caring for others. And then Jesus commands us to do the same by adding another commandment to those ten we already know about: to love one another.

We call today Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday; I noticed while planning Eastertime worship these past few months that many people around me said Holy Thursday, while I grew up with Maundy Thursday. As some may already know, that strange word comes from a Latin word, "mandatum," which means "command." It's the first word of verse 34 of our Gospel reading in Latin, the language used for centuries in Western Christianity to read the Bible. "Mandatum novum do vobis ut diligatis invicem sicut dilexi vos" is Latin for "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another."

And can actually love be commanded? (Really, Jesus?) Isn't love beyond commands or will or logic?

Well, when Jesus talking about loving one another, he doesn't use the Greek word "eros" referring to passionate love; nor the word "phileo" meaning family loyalty, as in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. Jesus uses the Greek word "agape," the self-

sacrificing love of a parent, the kind of love that promises a permanent welcome no matter what.

Jesus is commanding his disciples to act in a loving way, to care for and serve each other as he has cared for and served them. This type of love, the kind that's more about behavior than about emotion, you can command.

We are invited not just to love one another, but to show that love in our behavior, to put it out there in public for all to see. This evening we heard the historical basis of the Jewish Passover, a public and political event that helped the Israelites break free from oppression in Egypt after Moses negotiated for them and fought publicly for their freedom.

And Saint Paul explained the Last Supper in our second reading, using words that are familiar from sharing Holy Communion, that we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. For Paul, proclaiming means to live your faith in a way that's evident to others, that makes an impact, all based on remembrance and the love of Jesus.

Tonight we come together in Holy Week to remember Jesus' sacrificial love for us, and the sacrifice God made to witness the death of one child in order to save all the children of God.

The season of Lent ends with the image of the One who knelt to wash feet and who blessed bread. The command is straightforward: Give comfort to someone who needs it. Free your neighbor from suffering. Devote yourself to the wellbeing of all people.

It's easy enough to describe what being a Christian means: the body of Christ is the people who stand for love of neighbor. That's all there is to it. There's no room there for failing to forgive others, or remaining silent when someone is hurt, or deliberately harming another.

There's only room for love, as Jesus said, "so that everyone will know that you are my disciples." And this evening we are invited to be vulnerable, to place into Jesus' hands the parts of us that we most want to hide. To be forgiven, and to know what it means to be loved.

God continues to love and bless us. Tonight we know what it means to serve and be served, to love and be loved, so that we may in turn love and bless each other. The defining mark of Jesus' community is love. Not how we worship, or what kinds of creeds we say to describe what we believe. Just love. Love and work and love in action.

God in Jesus takes on our life so that wherever we go, Jesus is there with us and understands us. Wherever life takes us, Jesus has already been there. And in the resurrection is that promise that, where Jesus is now, there we will one day also be. Amen.