

Maundy Thursday  
March 29, 2018  
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## **To Love One Another**

What would you do if you knew that you died tomorrow? How would you spend your last day? Like, if you couldn't plan ahead and you only had the resources you have right now, what would you do? Would you go out to your favorite restaurant? Or would you drive to the beach and watch the sunset? Who would you call? Or who would you spend time with? What would you say to them? And how would you say it?

I imagine that such questions about how to make one's last day meaningful were weighing heavily on Jesus' mind that Thursday evening in the upper room. For the last supper is exactly that: the last time Jesus and all his disciples will eat together before the agony of the cross. Jesus knows that he dies tomorrow. What he says to his disciples tonight will be his parting words to them. So, what will he say and how will he say it?

He's got this one last chance to sum up all of his teaching—all of his lived example—to make sure his disciples understand. So, what does Jesus do? He makes it weird. Jesus gets up from a perfectly good dinner and makes everyone in the room feel uncomfortable.

Jesus—ever the transgressor of social boundaries—takes upon himself the role of a household servant, and he washes his disciples' feet. Now, the washing of feet was a common practice, but it was not something that a Rabbi would ever do.

In Jesus' day, people walked long distances in sandals along dirt roads where sewage was commonly disposed of. Feet were considered supremely... yucky. In Jewish communities, the act of washing another person's feet was so demeaning, that even a Jewish slave was not permitted to do so. It was something that was only ever assigned to non-Jewish slaves; and almost always a woman.

A Jewish disciple, then, would never even think to wash his rabbi's feet. But here we see Jesus the rabbi washing his disciples' feet. Jesus girds himself like a servant, with a towel tied around his shoulders to keep his sleeves up. And one-by-one, Jesus goes around to each of his disciples, pouring water over their feet, and wiping them with the loose end of the towel tied around him.

And when Jesus does that—when he wipes the disciples' feet with that towel—he symbolically previews what he will do in the hours ahead: taking upon himself the dirt and grime of humanity, wearing it like a garment.

This act is totally unique. Nowhere else in ancient literature does a superior wash the feet of his inferiors. Jesus interrupts more than just a supper; he interrupts all conventional categories of honor and shame. In fact, what Jesus does is so outrageous that Peter objects to the whole thing: "This is improper and I will have no part of it." Peter doesn't think of himself as worthy of his master's washing, but Jesus tells him that if he has no part in this washing, then he will have no part in him.

Two weeks ago, I was on a class retreat up in Maryland and the place where we stayed at was this Christian camp. And the camp had been advertised to us as "a woodland resort." It didn't take long after I arrived to figure out that the term "resort" had been used loosely. Now, I don't want to get into the details, so I'll simply say that the place had a

cozy, Blair Witch feel to it. But it wasn't all bad. The lounge area where we ate all our meals together had a statue out front. And the plaque on it read, "The Servant Christ."

The statue was an image of Jesus kneeling down, with sleeves rolled up and hands outstretched, ready to receive the foot of a disciple. It was an image of this foot-washing scene. And I didn't know exactly what it was, but something about this statue captivated me. Something about it didn't quite fit my mental image of the scene. And then it finally dawned on me: This servant Christ, with hands outstretched, was looking up.

He was looking up as if into the eyes of the disciple whose feet he is about to wash. And that gave me pause. So much of my own work—whether I'm reading or writing— involves looking down at whatever task I'm doing. I had always imagined that Jesus would have been looking down, focused on washing the disciples' feet.

It never occurred to me that he would be looking up into the disciples' eyes as he preformed this service for them. And the mere thought of that left me misty-eyed because it meant that as Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he looked up at them, not merely seeing their faces, but seeing them for who they really were.

It meant that Jesus saw Thomas' doubt, he saw Peter's denial, and he saw Judas' betrayal. He saw all of that and loved them all the same. Peter was right: he wasn't worthy. None of them were. But Jesus deemed them worthy because he loved them. The beginning of our gospel reading says that Jesus "loved them to the end." But that sentence in Greek actually means "he loved them perfectly," or "he loved them to the full."

The servant Christ is an icon of perfect love. In him we see the very same God who formed humankind from the dust, now washing the dust from between his creature's toes. In him the creator God stoops down and without words says to each of the disciples and says to each us, "I see you—every part of you—and I love you."

When Jesus returns to his place at the table, he makes it clear that what he has done should serve as an example. He gives them this radical, counter-cultural act of mutual submission and then he places it next to the *novum mandatum*—the new commandment for which this holy day—this Maundy Thursday—is named. And his commandment is simply this: to love one another.

Jesus knows that he dies tomorrow. He knows that these are his parting words. The thing that compels him to make dinner weird—the thing he does to make his last day meaningful is issuing this new commandment: Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another.

And that's it! There's no secret wisdom. There's no theological formula. It's as simple as it seems: Because Jesus loves us perfectly, we are to love one another. But just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy. Sure, we can affirm that foot washing is a sacramental sign of God's love for us and our corresponding love for each other, but feet are still yucky – even in our modern culture. And, more importantly, we don't always like each other.

But that's the genius of this gift that Jesus gives us: the foot washing puts us in the proper posture to love one another. The boundary between honor and shame is blurred beyond recognition. And our claims to anger are rendered null and void through our mutual submission. When we wash each other's feet, we can't help but recognize in each other our capacity to doubt, deny, and betray one another—and to love all the same.

It's hard to stay angry with a person who's washing your feet. And it's equally hard to stay angry with someone whose feet you're washing. Something about this intimate act disarms us. God's love seems to flow through it directly into our relationships. And somewhere in the midst of the foot washing—our love for one another is perfected—and, as Jesus says, our discipleship becomes known.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us now follow the commandment of our Teacher and Lord. Let us make this dinner weird. Amen.