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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/28/2013, Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14, Psalm 116:1, 10-17, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26,
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Love, As We See It in Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he *loved* them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

This is a sermon about love. I bet everyone is in favor of love. Back in 1965, Jackie DeShannon sang about it:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of...

We were not embarrassed by the song back then. It seemed simply right to many of us.

“Love” is a powerful word, but also mysterious. It can cover contrary opinions and convictions. To take a political example, I believe that when Democrats and Republicans are at their best, they are *both* trying to practice love in this world, and it is probably best to credit them with such charity. They both try to love our land and all our people, but disagree about the content of love. Likewise at the personal level. I bet we all agree that what the world needs now is love, sweet love, but we might not agree about what love requires.

What I want to do in this sermon is to make some progress in learning about love by looking at Jesus who “loved them to the end.” He loved his disciples to the end.

BOTH HUMBLE-MINDED AND HOPEFUL

Yes, Jesus loved his disciples. But if you really want to see love in action, especially watch Jesus in his dealings with Judas. There we learn that the love of Christ is both humble-minded toward the sinner and hopeful for that one.

Years later, when the disciples reflected back on that first Maundy Thursday, it probably amazed them and moved them to realize that among those whose feet Jesus washed that night was Judas. Judging by the flow of our Bible text,

this is no mere happenstance, but goes to the heart of the matter. Jesus loved Judas in this sense: Jesus was kind toward Judas, but with a kindness that sought the repentance of the sinner. The love of Jesus was not simply good will toward the Judas, but also an earnest attempt to draw the man back from the cliff, back from the treachery he contemplated.

There is something about the footwashing that is important to the life of love. Love is humble, yes. I think we all knew that. Love requires that we pay ourselves no mind for a while, but instead elevate in our estimation that one who stands before us and whom we are trying to love. So, love is humble, yes. But the fact that *Judas* is among those whose feet Jesus washes teaches us something else about love. It is not just humble. It is also hopeful—always hopeful even for the sinner.

At the end of our reading, we find the name of our day: *Maundy* Thursday. The day is named for our Lord’s “new commandment,” in Latin, the *mandatum*. Jesus says this:

³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; *even as I have loved you*, that you also love one another. (John 13:34, RSV)

It is not just *any* kind of love that Jesus is urging. Rather, it is love “as I have loved you.”

So, let’s look at Jesus washing the feet of Judas to see how Jesus loves, that we might imitate him.

HIS CONDUCT, NOT HIS EMOTIONS

The first thing I note about Jesus washing the feet of Judas is that we know nothing about the *emotions* of our Lord. They might have been wild, but we do not see them. What we can see is his conduct. His conduct is calm and designed to create every opportunity for Judas to repent. But *inside*: Ahh, that is a mystery. Indeed, it is a mystery much like that of ourselves when we are trying to do some good in this world.

Our text reveals two things that Jesus *knew* as he dealt with his disciples that evening: First, he knew that “that his hour had come” (John 13:1). He knew that his life was drawing near its end. And second, he “knew *who* was to betray him” (John 13:11). These two dramatic things he *knew*. What the text does not reveal is how Jesus *felt* about them.

So, his conduct is calm, but inside his heart might well have been breaking, and fear might have gripped him. There is little time left. Jesus knows that. If he is going to win Judas, he must do it quickly, for time is running out. Furthermore, what he must win Judas *from* is something infuriating and

frightening. He must to win back Judas from treachery! Of all the miserable things on earth, it is bound to rile the emotions to be betrayed by a friend.

JUDAS: A DISCIPLE!

Judas was one of the disciples. He had been called by Jesus into the apostolic company. He had witnessed the miracles of our Lord. He had heard the mighty preaching of our Lord. Why, one would have to be wood or a rock to not be changed for the better by that divine preaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Judas was there. Judas heard the preaching. His life was saved along with the rest in the boat in the storm on the sea. He saw the lame healed, the possessed freed, the blind eyes opened, the little girl raised from the dead. “Give her some food,” Jesus had said:

⁴¹Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi”; which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and walked (she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. ⁴³And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5:41-43, RSV)

So kind, so natural, so very triumphant in the face of death! “Give her something to eat.” Judas had seen wonders like this. He had been entrusted with the alms. He had experienced ten thousand moments with Jesus that we have not yet experienced. And yet he betrays our Lord!

OPPORTUNITIES TO REPENT

Jesus knows of the betrayal, but does not disgrace the man. Notice how again and again, even as the clock is ticking and his end is approaching, Jesus gently creates opportunity for Judas to change his mind. He washes his feet. He knows that he washes the feet of his betrayer, but he includes him in the washing. He does not single Judas out by skipping over his feet, but takes in his hands and washes the very feet that will soon go out and run to the authorities to betray him.

Soon after washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus again appeals to Judas in a quiet and gentle way. The text says this:

²¹When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. (John 13:21, KJV)

“One of you.” Not “Judas, I know that it is *you* who shall betray me,” but simply “one of you shall betray me.” Jesus knew that Judas had treachery on his mind, but with that way of putting things, Jesus left room for the man silently to repent. Indeed, it left all of the disciples searching their own hearts as to whether they would be the ones to betray our Lord. Judas could have silently changed his mind about the betrayal. No one would have known. His name would have been saved. His reputation protected. Jesus created this room for him to repent. When the situation was desperate for Jesus, and when his life depended on Judas repenting, Jesus nonetheless deals with the man only with gentleness.

It could have been otherwise. Chrysostom puts the point well:

Yet it was in His power, had He willed it, to have withered him like the fig-tree, to have cut him in two as He rent the rocks, to have cleft him asunder like the veil; but He would not lead him away from his design by compulsion, but by choice. Wherefore He washed his feet; and not even by this was that wretched and miserable man shamed. (Homily LXX, on John 13)

Jesus permitted Judas to eat at the same table as the rest of them, not singling him out, but hoping for his improvement and leaving room for it.

And then there is that final quiet appeal of our Lord to Judas. Jesus gives Judas a piece of bread. I imagine him looking Judas in the eye and hoping one last time that Judas will repent of the evil he intends:

²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.” ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the festival”; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. (John 13:27-30, NRSV)

The other disciples did not know the import of those words, “That thou doest, do quickly.” Only Jesus and Judas knew what these words meant. Even then, when Judas realized that Jesus knew what he was up to, Judas could have stepped back from the cliff. He had this last chance from our Lord to repent, but he hardens his heart and goes out to do his wretched deed.

LOVE IS NOT SIMPLY KINDNESS

From this story, we learn something important about love. Love is not simply kindness toward others. More than that, it is kindness aimed toward the repentance of the sinner and the improvement of that one. Jesus is kind toward Judas, but his kindness has a goal: that the sinner should repent.

For parents, then, loving your children is not quite the same thing as giving them things or protecting them from being sad. Those things are good, but true love always labors for the repentance of the sinner and the amendment of life. Love not simply the life of others, but also their souls. And so love should include instruction and discipline.

And for the victim of abuse or adultery, love is not the same thing as acquiescence in the suffering of wrong. Love is restless for repentance. Love refrains from violence, yes, but it seeks that others should become better.

THE REMAINDER OF THE STORY

The remainder of this evening's story continues the illustration of Christian love. For when Judas went out into that night, it hammered, as it were, the final nail into the coffin of Jesus. Yet having loved his own, he "loved them to the end." Jesus did not flee when Judas headed off to the authorities. Instead, he used the time left to him to comfort and instruct his disciples. His great theme caps this evening's lesson. It is his commandment that we love as he loves:

³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34, RSV)

From the example of Jesus, we see that love is dogged, but also hopeful. The gentleness of Jesus is not of the depressing sort, as if he expects nothing much from those he loves. He is not resigned to things never changing. It is not that he is good, but expects the sinner to remain lost in sin. Rather, Jesus is good in that most excellent of ways: he seeks that we should become good too. He even seeks that Judas should become good.

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

Now, our Maundy Thursday liturgy turns very personal. The footwashing is at hand. As we have our feet washed, the haunting words of "Ah, Holy Jesus" could well be on our minds:

Who was the guilty?
Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason,
Jesus hath undone thee.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus,
I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee. (LBW 123, verse 2)

Jesus took the feet of Judas in his hands and washed them. Thereby he showed love for Judas, but always with an eye to the man's repentance. I do believe he shall gaze upon us that way too.

And then, in the Blessed Sacrament, this same loving Jesus who spoke so gently to Judas will speak to you and me too. Again, his voice will be low and personal. He will direct his words to each of us, one by one. "This is my body, this is my blood, given for you." In our dealings with others, let us imitate his dogged, but hopeful love. And in our dealings with him, let us take it to heart that his love seeks that we should pick up again and renew the life of repentance. Judas turned away from that appeal, but let us do better than him. Indeed, let us claim Jesus both as our Savior and as our model of the godly life. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

And now, let us continue this liturgy in the manner our Lord taught us: with the footwashing. During the choir anthem and the hymn, feel free to come forward, take a seat, and remove your shoes and socks for the footwashing