

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/24/2016, Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31-35. Psalm 88

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

My opening text is the last verse spoken in this evening's liturgy. It is that moving verse after which the last of our lights go out in our church, and the congregation leaves in silence. Sexton Chris Schulze always does a good job pacing the darkness during the Stripping of the Altar. As Kenda Ward and Christine Hoffman quietly and methodically remove just about everything from our chancel, Chris slowly turns off the lights of our church, until we reach this final verse — my main text for this evening. It is Psalm 88:19. It gives us words to imagine the prayer of Jesus as he is arrested and abandoned. The words go this way:

My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me,
and darkness is my only companion. (Psalm 88:19, LBW)

Then Chris flips the final switch, and we are left in darkness, except for a light in the narthex to help guide us on our way home. "... and darkness is my only companion."

Never do things seem quite so right, and then so terribly wrong as on Maundy Thursday. This world is at its best when Jesus is washing the feet of his disciples and giving them his commandment of love. And this world is at its worst when Judas gives Jesus the kiss of betrayal, the guards arrest Jesus, his disciples abandon him, and Jesus is led off for his nighttime interrogations. "...and darkness is my only companion."

Let's look at these two Maundy Thursday moments — at the beauty of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and, then, the nighttime arrest and abandonment of Jesus.

First, our Lord's washing of the feet. Angels, looking on from heaven, must have been astonished by this. He who *creates* the feet now *washes* them. Indeed, he who creates the disciples, you and me, and the angels themselves now kneels and washes the dust and mud from the feet of his disciples. The angels above were content to spend eternity bowing before this holy One, Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father. The whole heavenly host were glad to spend eternity bowing before Jesus, yet Jesus now bows before his disciples and washes their feet.

If anything could speak up for love, I think it is this: that our Maker should wash the feet of his friends and call them to do the same for one another. This divine washing of the feet expresses that the universe is on the side of love. The whole flow of reality favors love:

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 such a strange use of power. Jesus had all the power in the world. If Jesus says to the wild storm of the sea, “Peace, but still,” then wind and wave hasten to become peaceful and still (Mark 4). If Jesus says to leprosy or lameness, “Let my people go!”, then the man jumps up, throws away his crutches, and dances a jig (Mark 2, John 5). If Jesus says to the dead child on her bed, “Maid, arise,” then the child returns to life and rushes into the arms of her mother (Luke 8). Why, if Jesus were to say to this mountain “Remove hence to yonder place,” then that mountain would leap to obedience and move to that place (Matthew 17). And if Jesus were to summon twelve legions of angels to save him, any one of those angels could have done so — aye, and inflicted much damage on our world in the process if so desired.

So, Jesus has all the power in the world. Yet how does he use his power? He uses it to kneel down, to wash the feet of his disciples, and to bid his followers to be people of love in this world:

¹³You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:13-15, RSV)

Do you remember the child’s old-fashioned toy, the top? Do you remember how when you set the top spinning, sometimes it wobbles and struggles at first. But if that top should reach its proper state of balance, then it can spin on — smooth and fun to watch. So it is with humanity: We do not reach our proper state of balance until we turn to works of love. We can expend great sums of energy chasing after selfish goals. But our life is out-of-kilter until we start spending more of our energy on love. There is a real state of rest for human beings — but it is not a lazy rest. Rather it is a rest that consists in following the loving example of our Lord Jesus:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-39, KJV)

So, in the conduct of our family life, our vocations, and our lives as citizens, let us seek to love more, thereby making everything spin better in this world.

And now we turn to the end of the liturgy. There is a cry at the start of Psalm 88 that sounds as if it could be the cry of Jesus in his nighttime prayers there in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our version of Psalm 88 comes from our worship book, the LBW, which is a lovely translation of the Psalms, in my opinion. In the LBW version, verses 2 and 3 go this way:

²Let my prayer enter into your presence [O Lord, my Savior];
incline your ear to my lamentation.

³For I am full of trouble;
my life is at the brink of the grave.

The King James Version is maybe even more moving:

²Let my prayer come before thee [O LORD God of my salvation]:
incline thine ear unto my cry;

³For my soul is full of troubles:
and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

How could things have changed so quickly? How could they have gone so wrong! Just a few hours earlier, Jesus is washing the feet of his disciples and commanding them to be people of love. For those few moments, the world seems to be spinning right.

But now, later that same evening, the guards are assembling, with their swords and torches. Judas is preparing to lead them to Gethsemane, where he will identify Jesus with his kiss of betrayal. And Jesus is praying that, if it should be his heavenly Father's will, he might be spared this cup of suffering that is rushing toward him. I can easily imagine his groans of spirit as he prayed in the garden that evening:

³...my soul is full of troubles:
and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

Indeed, the life of Jesus does draw nigh to the grave. It is the will of his heavenly Father that he should continue on his path and that he should not be spared his cup of suffering. Judas leads the guards, they arrest Jesus, and Jesus endures an exhausting and brutal night of interrogation, only to be crucified tomorrow, Good Friday, starting at noon.

This sudden descent from the light and love of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples to the nighttime closing in of death on Jesus reminds us that the path of love in this world faces opposition. The awful fact of Good Friday is that our God is a God of love, but our world killed him! And we need to be on guard because that world is also *in* us! That is, until Jesus comes again with power and glory and

boots sin right of the world, the humble kneeling to wash the feet of others and whole path of love illustrated by Jesus — well, that manner of life shall be a *contested* one for us.

Let it be so. Life was contested for Jesus, all the way to the Cross, so let it be a contested one for us who bear His name. But even in the midst of the contest, let us know that we are at our best, and we are spinning most harmoniously with the intention of our Maker, whenever we seek to follow the commandment of love of Him who loved our world to the very end, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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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 foot washing.