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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/13/2017, Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17, 31-35

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

In the night in which he was betrayed, after Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples, he gave to them his new commandment. He said this:

<sup>34</sup>A 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)

In this Maundy Thursday Bible story, the meaning of Christ's life reaches perfect clarity. Jesus is about love. He walked the path of love all his days, and he asks you and me to walk that good path too now in our days.

Sometimes I am asked by families I might not know in the neighborhood to do the funeral for a loved one. I bet such requests come to many clergy. The funeral director phones and asks whether I would be willing to do the funeral for such and such a person. If I can, I nearly always say yes. It is hard to say no to a family in grief. The various funeral directors know about me that I am a Christian clergyman and that I am going to talk about Jesus in the funeral. When they judge that that is what the family would want, then the funeral director places a call to me. And if I can do it, I do.

I have a certain discipline about such funerals. I try to talk to the family in advance, to express my sympathy to them, but even more, to ask them to talk about their loved one. It helps me prepare the sermon. And so I ask them to talk about what mattered to their loved one. What did he care about? What was important to her? So, I learn what I can and I preach as best I can. But I am always aware that I have heard just a portion of that person's story. I did not know the person as the family did. I did not know the person when he was young and strong. I did not know her when she was confident and bright-eyed and setting out to conquer the world. I did know the dignity with which they bore their sickness or the sorrows of life. So I preach as best I can, hoping that in some measure I am talking about the true person and what mattered to that person.

Well, in this evening's Bible story about Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed, we get a true picture of Jesus. We are permitted to see with perfectly clarity what mattered to him.

His disciples mattered to him. More than any dignity heaven or earth could bestow on him, his disciples mattered to him. And so, he knelt down and washed their feet. He knew that he was soon to die. St. John says that Jesus

knew that “his hour had come.” It was as if, in the little bit of time left, Jesus had the chance to say one more time, and with perfect simplicity, what mattered to him. And so he washes the feet of his disciples. He even washes the feet of his betrayer. He serves them. Till his dying hour, he serves those around him.

And then, lest there be any misunderstanding, Jesus puts his life’s principle into words. He speaks of love:

<sup>34</sup>A 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)

No need for the local preacher to ask the family what mattered to Jesus. Jesus himself makes it lucid and unmistakable in the night in which he was betrayed: His disciples matter to him. You matter to him! Every soul on this planet matters to him!

Come Easter Sunday morning, we will raise the glad cry, “Jesus is risen. Alleluia! He is risen indeed! Alleluia.” Part of what this means is that this world is in the hands of Someone whose greatest concern in life is that you and I should flourish. As he cared about his disciples in the night in which he was betrayed, so he cares about you and me now. He loves us. This is good news for us and should give us some courage as we go on in life.

But there is another part to that glad cry: Jesus is risen! I speak of the moral part. I speak of what it means for you and me in our daily life that Jesus should be risen. It means the vindication of his way of life.

I bet I am being a bit imprecise in my Trinitarian theology, but I also think I am on to something. The resurrection of Jesus means that as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit scanned the human race, through all the centuries in which our species has lived or ever will live, they settled on *this* One as the life they admired. Their eyes were drawn to Jesus and his manner of life. *This* is the life of which they approved. This is the *right* life for you and me. The universe is on the side of love, for the Triune God is on that good side — the way of love.

If Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, can kneel down and wash dusty feet, so can we. We can humble ourselves and pour out ourselves for others. St. John Chrysostom, for example, after pondering our Lord’s washing of the feet even of the betrayer, wondered how in the world any *of us* could hesitate to serve others. And so the saint said this:

He who sitteth upon the Cherubim washed the feet of the traitor, and dost thou, O man, thou that art earth and

ashes and cinders and dust, dost thou exalt thyself, and art thou highminded?<sup>1</sup>

In a thousand details in the days and years ahead of us, we are going to have the opportunity to follow the pattern of Christ's love. In everything from setting the table for Easter dinner to the way we care for each other as we get older, we are going to have the chance to share in the way of Jesus and his love. In our gentleness and in our sternness, in our doing and in our refraining, in our teaching and in our learning, in our giving and in our being willing to receive, we have chances lying before us to help others to flourish as our Maker wants them to flourish.

About Jesus, there was no doubt at the end of his life about what mattered to him. What mattered was humanity. Let it be said of us too: he cared about people, she cared about people, and did something about it. Indeed, she loved after the manner of Jesus Christ, he loved after the manner of Jesus, doing some good on this earth and bringing some glory to the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, Chapter 13.