“Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end.” These words from our reading for this evening stand as a sort of title or headline over all that will follow. All that had come before this—God speaking creation into existence through his Word, this same Word taking on the flesh of humanity in the womb of the Virgin, the miracles and the healings, the teaching and preaching—all of this shows that Jesus had loved his own who were in the world. All of what came before this night is summarized in the first half of that verse: Jesus had loved his own who were in the world. But all that shall come after this moment, all that comes after these words at the head of our reading, it will all show how Jesus loved them to the end.

And it is love’s end that we remember these next few days; it is Jesus’ act of loving his own to the end that gathers us together this evening. And these words stand over all that comes next, interpreting his words and actions for us: this is love to the end, this is the end of love, love knows no further end or meaning or purpose than this, love can have no greater expression, love can have no hope outside of what Jesus is going to do here. And so, we have but to watch, watch and see love’s perfect and final end unfold before our eyes, we have but to hear this love spoken to us, proclaimed in our very midst.

In the reading for this evening we are given a first glimpse at this love: we are given a little peek behind the curtain before the great drama of the world shall begin. But the image that we are given is one that we would probably not have expected, surely one that we would not have chosen. Jesus is taking the form of the very lowest of slaves, the one tasked with the dirtiest, most menial work. Jesus takes the lowest form of humility that the disciples could imagine a person descending to. And Peter, misunderstanding, tells Jesus to stop. Peter had forgotten Jesus’ rebuke a few chapters earlier, when Peter told Jesus that he should not speak of dying and Jesus had responded to Peter, saying, “Get behind me Satan.” Jesus does this because he is not going to let Peter misunderstand what is about to take place. Jesus says to Peter, “What I am doing now you will not understand, but soon you will understand this, and you will understand much more.” Jesus, in washing the feet of the disciples, is showing that there is no depth of humility that he is not willing to descend in order to love his own who were in the world, there is no depth of debasement and humiliation that could cause Jesus’ love to balk or to hesitate.

Compared to what comes next, compared with the depths to which Jesus will descend in love, the washing of the feet may look like but a small token. But this
would be to misunderstand Jesus’ actions here. These are the last hours in which Jesus will have any sense of ordinary control over what he does. This is the night that Jesus will be betrayed, and from this evening on he will be led, like a lamb who is led to the slaughter, he will be led to the cross. But on this same night Jesus sets forth two enacted prophecies of what shall come, he pulls the curtain back twice for us, as it were. Jesus takes bread and wine, says that they are his body and blood, and prophesies the crucifixion and death that he will suffer.

But in the washing of the feet Jesus sets forth a second prophecy, pulls back the curtain before the great drama a second time. Jesus is showing that though he will be captured, though he will be bound and seemingly overpowered every step of the way, though he will stand as one lonely person before a powerful mob, Jesus doesn’t take a single step because it is forced upon him, as if this were against his will. Every step that Jesus will take, every blow that he will receive, he takes and receives because of his great love: all that happens he endures because of his great love for his Father and for his own who were in the world. Jesus pulls back the curtain to show Peter, and to show us, all that comes next is because of his love; therefore, Jesus is saying to Peter and to us, do not be ashamed of my humility, do not be ashamed of the depths of my love. Jesus goes down onto his knees to wash the feet of the disciples, yet he shall descend far deeper than this. Jesus descends to his knees to wash the dirt from the feet of the ones that he loves, but soon hell itself shall feel Christ’s descent, soon death itself shall know Love’s descent, and death and hell and humanity shall forever be changed.

The great drama of the world is about to unfold before our very eyes and ears once again, yet the climax shall be misunderstood if we bypass what comes before it. These next few days bear as a title over them: Jesus’ love to the end. If we watch with Jesus these next few days, we will see the end, the fulfillment, the climax of love; we will see the humble love of God made known in Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.