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Maundy Thursday; April 18, 2019

In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every time that we gather together as Christ’s holy people, it is this night that we look back to, that we remember. In every celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we hear these words: “on that night that he was betrayed.” This is the night when the disciples were preparing for the Passover, Israel’s remembrance of the day that the LORD delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. This is night that Jesus institutes his holy meal, the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the central act of our Christian worship and service. This is the night when Jesus strips himself, puts on a towel, and washes the dirty feet of his disciples, even Judas. This is the night that Jesus will go to dark Gethsemane, and watch and pray, until Judas returns and betrays the Lord with a kiss. We will also watch this night as our sanctuary is darkened, stripped bare, and emptied, showing that Jesus would willingly be led to death, would willingly be stripped of his freedom and would choose to suffer for us, because of our sin. And then we will all depart from here in silence, we will not hear the words “go in peace, to serve the Lord,” rather as if we have scattered like the disciples when Jesus was taken captive.

There is certainly no shortage of words and events for us to contemplate this evening, and indeed for the rest of these Three Great and Holy Days, called the Great Triduum. These Great Three Days are the three greatest nights in the Christian year. Above all other nights in the church year, this is the night of love. Indeed, that is where we get the name for this first of the Three Great Days: Maundy is the englishing of the Latin mandatum, which means “commandment.” This night, the night in which Jesus is betrayed, is also the night that Jesus gives the new mandatum, the new commandment. We might say that this is New Commandment Thursday: “a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.” So this is the night of love.

Jesus and his disciples reclined together at this table. This was a meal that was supposed to be slow, comfortable, taking time to eat and enjoy relaxed and familiar fellowship. This was the intimacy of a family. Jesus gathers his disciples to himself as if they are his little children. Tonight, Jesus has gathered us, you and me, just as he gathered his disciples around himself in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. Whatever external circumstances there are that may have provided for you to be here this evening, whatever the “changes and chances of [your own] life” have been, make no
mistake about it, Christ is the one who has called you here. He has provided for and
ordered your life so that you would be here this evening. Jesus Christ has drawn you
to be here—in this place at this time, to meditate on and behold the mystery of the
majestic events of the night that Jesus was betrayed.

It would be well for us to take Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus as our example
for tonight, and for Good Friday and for the Easter Vigil: to sit at the feet of Jesus, to
attend to what he says and what he does, to contemplate these events that are at the
very center of the salvation of the world. On this night, and throughout these great
Three Days, that is the one thing necessary—behold our Lord, meditate upon his
words and actions.

The unique word for this evening is the one that gives the name to this day—Maundy
Thursday, New Commandment Thursday.

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

The new commandment that is so important, so central to the Christian faith and life,
so central to Christ’s suffering and death that we have a day set apart for it in the midst
of Holy Week is nothing other than the command to love one another. But Jesus
knows that we are ever in danger of letting our own notions of love take off into
flights of fancy, to be distorted into our own attempts at self-love and pride. So he
does not simply say that they are to love one another. No, he tells them to love one
another \textit{even as I have loved you}. With his words, Jesus immediately tethers this love to
himself. And precisely here is the newness of the command. For was it not the case
that in the Old Testament there was already a command to love? In Leviticus Moses
had commanded the people of God: \textit{love your neighbor as yourself} (19:18). So the command
to love was nothing new. This command is new, as Jesus told his disciples, as Jesus
tells us, because of Jesus, because he is God in the flesh, and because of what he is
about to do. So Jesus doesn’t just leave his disciples on their own to try to fill in the
content of this command—he interprets this love for them. We are to love one
another \textit{just as Jesus loved us}. So, with his words, Jesus interprets this new commandment
for us.

But there is another way that Jesus interpreted this command for his disciples and for
us this night. More than just with his words, Jesus interprets this commandment with
his own actions. He shows this love not in word only, but also in deed. That was
what he was doing when he washed the feet of his disciples. When Jesus washed their
feet, he is showing how great his love was for them. This love was what motivated
God to create us in the first place. And when we had fallen into sin, this love was what
motivated God to intercede in the lives of his estranged creatures. As Saint Paul says
in Philippians 2, speaking about God’s condescension to us in Christ’s becoming human,

*Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.*

(Philippians 2:5–7 RSV)

Paul’s words here are “dramatically enacted”1 by Jesus in our story: Jesus Christ rises from the table, lays aside his garments, girds himself with a towel, and does the work of a slave, just as he had laid aside his rightful place at the Father’s right hand, and taken on the form of a slave when the Word of God became flesh, became human. The Son of God is stooping down from his heavenly throne, so that he might wash humanity clean once again, clean from our transgressions and sins. As the powerful Lenten hymn by Saint Gregory the Great puts it, “he deigned our mortal form to wear, / and shared our human want and care.”2 Jesus is God in the flesh. He is their master, their teacher, their Lord—he is our master, and teacher and Lord. But as God in the flesh, he overturns all of our expectations for what a master and teacher and lord ought to be. He does not rule over us in tyranny, his is a rule of humility, and gentleness, and love. He did not come to be served, he came to serve. He did not come to take a ransom, but to give his own life as a ransom for many. He did not come to gain riches for himself—how could the one in whom all things hold together gain riches? He became poor, so that in him we might gain riches beyond measure—life eternal with him. He did not come to take, but to give. God so loved the world, that he gave. He gave himself, so that the world might have life in him. And so Jesus takes a basin and a jar of water, and wraps himself in a slave’s towel, and does the work that belonged to the lowest slave in the household. This is love. Jesus is showing all of his disciples, that night and this night, that to love is to serve, to love is to give. A new commandment he gives, to love as he loves. We love by becoming servants, slaves to one another. There is no extravagance in giving that could be too much, no condescension in serving that could be too low—for Christ has stooped to wash away the transgressions and sin of his wayward children.

So Jesus interprets this command in two ways, both with his words, and with his deeds. But Jesus is doing far more here than just giving his disciples an example to follow. He is giving an example, but he is doing more than that. Jesus is always doing more than just giving an example to follow, but he is also never doing less than giving

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1 This phrase is that of Fleming Rutledge, “Lord, Not My Feet Only,” in *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 74.

an example. Humbling himself before his disciples, showing them and us that to love is to give, to love is to serve, Jesus is also preparing them and us for understanding what comes next in the story. At the beginning of our reading this night about the last supper, the Gospel sets the context within which this story needs to be understood. I will read it again:

Now 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. And during supper, … Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. (John 13:1–4 RSV)

Jesus knew that his hour had come. This hour is none other than the time of his ultimate service, when he will serve to the uttermost limits of humiliation, this is the appointed time for which he stooped down from heaven. He knew that he was going to be betrayed, that he was going to suffer brutal death, that he was going to experience God-forsakenness with us and for us. In the washing of the feet, Jesus shows that he does this of his own accord, he does this willingly. He is willing to serve, it is his desire to serve, it is not forced upon him. It does not need to be forced upon him because he loves, he loves his own who are in the world to the end, to the end of his own life, he will love them to the outer limits of human pain and shame, to an infinite end that only God can love. He loves his own to the end of their own unloveliness. He will love Peter in the midst of his threefold denial, he will love Thomas in his unbelief, he will love all of his disciples in their various abandonments and betrayals. He will love his own literally to hell and back.

So indeed this is Maundy Thursday, a new commandment the Lord gives to us. Before we try to keep this commandment, it is necessary that we delve ever deeper into understanding Christ’s service to us, his love for us. For it is not just love that he commands, but to love as he has loved us. And his love goes all the way to death, even death on a cross. He shows a love that until now has been utterly unimaginable. It is no surprise then that Peter, when given but a glimpse of this love, had misunderstood it, had tried to reject this love. “Lord,” Peter had said, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” (John 13:6) “You shall never wash my feet” (13:7). Peter saw but a glimpse of this incomprehensible love, and it was a stumbling block for him. I think that it would have been the same for you and for me, though we might not have had Peter’s boldness to tell Jesus to stop. How much more is it a stumbling block for us to be called to love with this same love, to love to the outer limits of humiliation? How are we to love one another all the way to death? Before the night was over, even those who feasted with Jesus would utterly fail to keep this new commandment. We know of Judas, that he would sell Jesus for mere silver. But all of the disciples would fall
asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asks them to watch and pray with him. Their love would fail again when Jesus is arrested: every last one of them would flee, abandon Jesus. Peter, ever the spokesmen for the rest of this disciples, would continue this role when he would thrice deny his Lord. The twelve disciples, who argued and fought and tried to position themselves to be at Jesus’ right and left hand when he comes into his glory, would instead hand over this privilege to the two thieves who are crucified with him, one on his left, one on his right. All of the disciples would abandon Jesus. All of the disciples would betray him. All of the disciples failed in their love. Are we better than they? Has our love for our Lord never failed? Has our love for one another never failed? How shall we hope to do differently than they? Are we doomed to scatter like they?

Let us not forget the context in which this command comes. Jesus rises from the table to give the command, the same table at which he will take bread and cup in hand, and give his body and his blood to his disciples. This same night he washes their feet, telling his disciples that they are clean. He says this, he washes them, knowing that they will all betray him, that they will all abandon him, knowing that their love will fail. He gives this command knowing that they have and will fail to keep it. But he also does not leave them merely helpless in their failure either. He gives the command, but he gives more than just the command. He also gives the means to keep the commandment, to fulfill it.

And so it would be well for us not to forget that this commandment comes on the night that he was betrayed. Remember this was the night that our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying take and eat, this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people, for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me. These too were commands: do this to remember me, take and eat, take and drink.

Jesus gives us the new commandment this night, but he also gives us the means by which we will continue in his love, the means by which this love will come to dwell in us, the means by which we will love one another as he has loved us. He gives his own body and blood for our food and drink. In receiving the Body of Christ, we receive Christ with his fulfillment of this command of love. We receive Christ with his fulfillment of every commandment. We receive the commandment fulfilled—indeed, the whole of the Law fulfilled. We do not receive the Law unfulfilled and condemning, we receive the Law fulfilled and life-giving. When we receive Jesus Christ, the one who has perfectly and fully fulfilled the command to love, this command is written into our own hearts, as Christ weaves his heart into ours.
What we see over these three days is precisely the fulfillment of this command to love, indeed the fulfillment of the whole of the Law, the fulfillment of the Law for us. The heading that our lesson gives us is one side of that: having loved his own, he loved them to the end. Jesus is here loving his neighbor perfectly and fully, he is giving himself to the uttermost in love for his neighbor, he is loving his own to the end. So too is Jesus enacting perfect and total love for his Father. Jesus is showing what the life of a person totally abandoned to God, entirely devoted to God looks like. But Jesus is not only going this way as an example for us. He is showing forth the perfectly human life, to be sure, but he is not only setting us an example. In Jesus’ enacting of perfect love for his Father and perfect love for his neighbor, Jesus is not only showing the way, he is becoming the way. Jesus is taking humanity where it has never gone before: to the peak of fulfilling the Law, which is to love God with complete and total abandon, and to love the neighbor along the way. And it is this Jesus whom we receive in the Bread and Wine, this human fully alive that is taken into our bodies, this law-Fulfiller that comes to dwell in us.

And to this same one, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor and praise, both now, and forever. Amen