

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024
John 13:1-17, 31-35
Having Loved His Own

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

This past Sunday, in our congregational reading of the Passion story, we paused from time to time for hymn meditations on the reading. One of those hymns asked a question — a soul-searching question:

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.
("Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended," LBW 123, verse 2)

With these words, we take our place with all humanity, confessing our sins for the cause of which Jesus had to die and was willing to die that we might live.

Now I want to raise another soul-searching question, except that this time, it is a joyful question. It is a question based on the opening verse of this evening's Gospel Lesson from John 13. The words of the Evangelist go this way:

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. (John 13:1, RSV, my emphasis)

My question is, "Who are his own?" When the Bible says that "having loved *his own* who were in the world, he loved them to the end," to whom is Jesus referring? He loved his own to the end. Who are "his own"?

Well, an obvious first answer is that Jesus loved his disciples — he loved the Twelve, though even that answer contains within it a mystery of love. I mean, that Jesus should love Judas. It is a mystery that Jesus should love Judas, knowing as he did from the beginning, that Judas would betray him. St. John expresses the general principle of this knowledge early on, in Chapter 2:

²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; ²⁴but Jesus did not trust himself to them, ²⁵because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of

man; for he himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25, RSV)

And so it is that Jesus knew what was *in Judas*. In John 6, long before this evening's read, Jesus pins it down that Judas will disappoint him:

⁷⁰Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" ⁷¹He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him.

Yet, in this evening's reading, Jesus sets aside his garments, fills the wash basin, kneels down and washes the feet of Judas. He washes the feet of all the disciples, but I think it is extraordinary that he should wash the feet of Judas. He does not single Judas out. He does not say, "Judas, I wash your feet, though you are a rascal and I know that you will betray me." Instead, Jesus washes the feet of Judas without distinguishing and lowering that man from the rest.

Indeed, all of the dealings of Jesus with Judas that evening were gentle dealings, as if Jesus were quietly and privately saying to Judas, "Do not do this thing. Return the thirty piece of silver. Forget about them. Your soul is worth much more than thirty pieces of silver. Understand that I love you. I have washed your feet as a sign of my love. Please, do not betray me."

But Judas does betray Jesus, and so we reach the ominous last line of the dealings of Jesus with Judas on that night in which Jesus washed their feet:

²⁷Then after the morsel, Satan entered into [Judas]. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night.

The man went into *the night*. He left Jesus — the very Light of the world — and went out into the night to betray his Lord.

Yet Jesus had washed the feet of Judas. And Jesus had included Judas in his exhortation to the Twelve that they should serve one another as Jesus had served them. But Judas does not serve them — neither his fellow disciples nor Jesus himself. Instead, he goes out into the night to betray his Lord.

So, that is Judas. Jesus loves Judas in spite of who the man is. Let's set Judas aside for now. He goes his own way. So, we think of the other eleven disciples. It is natural for us to suppose that when the Bible says that Jesus

loved his own, he loved them to the end, the Bible is referring also to the other disciples beyond Judas.

But the thing is, those other disciples were a mixed bag. It is not just that Judas let Jesus down. So did the others. In the end, they all proved disappointing. As an example of how unreliable the disciples were, remember that after Jesus calmed the storm on the sea, his disciples knelt down and worshiped him.

³²And when [Peter and Jesus] got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:32-33, RSV)

Yet this same Peter who had walked on the water ends up denying Jesus in our Lord's moment of need. "I do not know the man," he swore. (Matthew 26:72). And the rest of the disciples — those men who had worshiped Jesus and said that truly Jesus is the Son of God — those fellows forsook Jesus and fled (Matthew 26:56).

We can conclude, then, that when the Bible says that Jesus loved "his own" to the end, the Evangelist meant that Jesus loved his Twelve disciples—disappointing lot though they proved to be.

But the true answer to my question is far richer than this. To whom does the Bible refer when it say that Jesus loved his own to the end? Answer, Jesus loved the Twelve, yes, but also he loves you and me just as much. Indeed, he has loved his own through all the generations and all the centuries of the church.

This is a huge part of what it means that Jesus is risen from the dead. It means that this same Jesus who washed the feet of the Twelve is willing to wash our feet too. Easter means that this same Jesus who looked around in the upper room and loved his Twelve disciples looks around here and now in Immanuel Lutheran Church and loves us too, to the end. There is no let-up in his love. It is continual. It is steady. It does not end. He looks at you sitting in your pew, and, I am grateful to say, he looks at me standing here in the pulpit, and he loves us to the end. In fact, he will say so to us this evening: "My body, my blood, I gave them *for you!*"

I figure that a great thing about the original Twelve disciples is that there were *twelve* of them. I mean, Jesus did not choose just one disciple, so that we would have but one example of what it is like to be a disciple. Instead, he chose a small crowd of disciples, with the typical variance that humanity displays. Peter went on to become a famous saint of the church. So did the others. They also became saints — all except for Judas. So, they nearly all became saints, but none of them were as prominent as Peter, either before the resurrection of Jesus or afterwards. Folks vary. They are not simply

replicas of one another. Yet Jesus loved Doubting Thomas, for example, as much as he loved the bold and forthright Peter.

And this risen Jesus who stands here in our midst, gazing at each of us in the pews and in this pulpit, loves each of us too, various though we might be. Some of you are obvious-looking saints. Some of us are more like people who, so far, have hidden our light under a bushel. Yet the love of Jesus never ends. It does not grow cold when it looks at people who so far might have disappointed him.

Jesus makes no distinctions among us. He loves us each one — enough to die for each of us — and he calls each of us to a life of love following his pattern. He does not exclude anyone from his new commandment to love as he has loved. He does not call us to love as he has loved — all *except* for that grouchy one! No, he calls us all, whether we are grouchy or not. He believes we can do it. He believes that we can love in a manner that will put people in mind of Jesus himself.

So, that is our Lord's *new* commandment. In the night in which he was betrayed our Lord said this to his disciples — both to the original ones long ago and to us modern-day disciples:

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)

I believe that this commandment is new, not in its content, but in its plausibility. The holy law of God had always required love, from the Ten Commandments all the way to Jesus's summary of the commandments:

³⁵And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" ³⁷And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:35-40, RSV)

Why, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had even asked us to love those who hate us and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). No, the new thing about our Lord's commandment of love is not its content, but the fact that he is about to step out the door, to head off to Gethsemane, to be arrested, mocked, killed, and rise again on Easter morning. That is, the new thing is that he now lives to walk beside us, even you and me today,

tomorrow, and forever. He lives to walk with us as we walk the path of love, to make sure that no final harm comes to us because of that love, but rather, that overwhelming, even eternal good shall come from our ways of love.

To this great Man of Love and this great Commander of love, be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.