

March 29, 2018

Holy Thursday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B

Primary Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Sermon Title: *“Our Ministry of Serving, Loving, and Caring”*

Theme

The story of the last supper in John’s gospel recalls a remarkable event not mentioned elsewhere: Jesus performs the duty of a slave, washing the feet of his disciples and urging them to do the same for one another.

Text

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

¹⁸I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." ¹⁹I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

²¹After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." ²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. ²³One of his disciples — the one whom Jesus loved — was reclining next to him; ²⁴Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." ²⁸Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the festival"; or, that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Sermon

Welcome again to Holy Thursday, aka Maundy Thursday. Over the last couple of years I have been trying to get away from using that name because it focuses on just one aspect of the infamous night of Jesus' betrayal. *Maundy*, being derived from the Latin word "mandatum" which means *command*. It refers to the command Jesus gave his disciples to love on another as he has loved them.

It is my favorite liturgy of the liturgical calendar and that is for many reasons. Among them:

- Arguably, though not technically, it marks the end of Lent.
- The conversation that took place between Jesus and his disciples is amazing and awe-inspiring considering what he knew was about to happen to himself.
- And I think that the Church's tradition of stripping the altar at the end of worship is a powerful ritual.

And for the entire 20 years of my ordained ministry, God always seems to bless me with one of the most powerful sermons of the year. Sometimes an idea comes to me weeks in advance, like the year I asked Craig Olsen to photograph your piety when receiving Holy Communion, then I displayed them for you in a slideshow I played back during the sermon. Do you remember that one? That was a God thing.

As I said in the beginning, Maundy Thursday focuses on the Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved them. I don't mean to tell you that his last command to his disciples is not important, it is ultimately important. Of all the things that could have been on his mind, his last command to his disciples was that they love one another as he has loved them. Not, "no matter what happens, stay by my side." No, that would have been justifiably selfish of him.

What he said was, and if you will allow me to paraphrase him,

"Things are going to go to hell in just a few hours. One of you will betray me. The rest of you will abandon me. Don't apologize. I understand. Those who have been out to get me will apprehend me and bring outlandish charges against me. I will not offer a defense for myself. Having been convicted, unspeakable things will be done to me that will result in my humiliation and ultimately in my

death. It is the way it was always supposed to be. I was sent by our Heavenly Father for this purpose; to bring forgiveness and salvation to the world. Listen to me carefully, the last and most important thing I have to tell you is this: love one another as I have loved you.”

Words that would take on new and unimaginable meaning in the next several hours.

In my study of scripture, the words and action of Jesus on that most holy and celebrated night reveal three actions that Jesus spoke of and more than just spoke of, he demonstrated.

In the washing of his disciple’s feet he demonstrated a life of service.

After he washed their feet he said,

“Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

The first action he spoke of and demonstrated is to *serve* others.

The second action he spoke of and demonstrated is in his last commandment, and that is to *love* others. He said,

³⁴“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I think *love* is an overused word in our culture and as a result it has lost some of its punch, its intensity. In our culture, we can get away with saying we love each other and it can be as meaningless as that overused question we never answer: “How you doing?” We don’t expect anyone to answer. If we are honest, we don’t really want an answer. And we aren’t prepared for an answer if we got one.

“Love you!” That isn’t the kind of love Jesus is talking about. His *command* - not a suggestion, not a piece of advice - his command is, “love one another. Just as I

have loved you.” And then he went out and demonstrated his radical kind of love on the cross.

The second action that he spoke of and demonstrated is to *love* others.

And the third action he spoke of and demonstrated is to *care* for others.

That evening, Jesus humbled himself and took on the role of the servant of the household and washed the feet of his disciples. This broke from cultural norms and just was not done, and it became an issue for Peter specifically, but I am sure the others were equally embarrassed by it. But Jesus turned to them all and said,

¹⁵“I have set you an example, that you also should *do* as I have done to you.

¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you *do* them.”

In this passage I have deliberately emphasized the powerful little two letter word “do” because it is the one word that makes all the difference when it comes to caring. Jesus demonstrated caring throughout the corpus of the gospels, but no place more effectively as he did on the cross. The gate to eternal life, perfect communion with God in the age to come was closed by human sin. Nothing we can do can open it, and for God that simply would not do. So God revealed in Jesus Christ left his rightful place in heaven and came to earth and lived our human life as an example to us of the godly life. Then he gave up his human life – he really died a human death – in order to win our salvation. This is how much he cares for us – all the way from heaven to hell and back again.

We can follow his example and *serve* others, and we do, through our Food Distribution ministry, through Share-A-Meal, through God’s Work Our Hands Day of Service and through so many other ministries and actions.

We can follow his command and *love* others. It is easy to say the words – “love you”- much harder to do. And that is where I see *caring* coming into the formula. Now just to be clear, I am not talking about the noun form of care. Sunday after next I will be on vacation, but I will leave you in the *care* of Pr. Bill Wilkins – noun form.

I am talking about the verb form of care. Does Pr. Wilkins *care* for you like I your pastor do? No – verb form. The verb form of care requires action, real commitment.

Think of it this way: If loving is the heart of a person, then caring is his or her hands.

And the third action Jesus spoke of and demonstrated is to *care* for others.

So you see, Jesus demonstrated all three of these, *servicing*, *loving*, and *caring* throughout his life, but most poignantly in his Passion.

It is the Church's tradition that on this night following corporate Confession and Forgiveness, that we did at the start of our worship this evening, that the Church's ministers offer the laying on of hands and the words of forgiveness to each individual. Are you forgiven without receiving those words? Of course! But being mortal and bound to sin as we are, God gives us those words spoken by the Church's ministers so that we can hear them with our mortal ears and believe that they are God's words made incarnate for each one of us.

Tonight however, I would like to add a feature to that ritual. If you present your right hand, palm up to me or Sister Pat who will be assisting me, we would like to make the sign of the cross on it, anointing you for the *servicing*, *loving*, and *caring* ministry that Jesus demonstrated most poignantly when he allowed nails to be driven through his own hands to be nailed to the cross.

After you receive it, you can rub it in, or wash it off – but the cross remains as a reminder of your baptism into Christ, and into his ministry of *servicing*, *loving*, and *caring* for others in his name.

We do it because he first loved us.

And we do it because he commands his disciples to do it, and that includes you and me.

And we will do it because he is Lord of our lives and therefore commands us to.
Amen