

Sermon Maundy Thursday 2025

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Text : John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Theme: A Faithful Gesture

*This is one of the three greatest days of the Christian year. It is one of my favorite days of the liturgical year as it is family time, intimate time together remembering our most cherished stories and bringing them into our present. So, I am glad that you are here to share the beginning of the Sacred Three Days in this place and among this community of those trying to live faithfully as friends of Jesus in this world.

Today we remember that on a night long ago in Jerusalem, Jesus sat at table with his closest companions, his inner circle. I suppose that there is nothing wrong for you to consider yourself one Jesus' inner circle today – not because you are somehow better or more worthy of it than others, but simply because in the mystery of God you have been drawn here today to celebrate and remember this last supper.

Jesus shares an intimate meal with his friends that is the very beginning of a meal we continue to share with each other. In a way, it is a meal that still continues at center of our worship lives. In this meal, Jesus declares his sacrificial love for us and draws us into his love. This Eucharistic meal we share makes us siblings at the deepest level, each of us drawing closer to one another as Jesus draws us close to himself.

It reminds me of one of my favorite Eucharistic Hymns:

**Come my Light, my Feast my Strength: such a light as shows a feast;
such a feast as mends in length; such a strength as makes his guest.**

#487 1982 Hymnal

At this feast we are privileged guests who see into the heart of God in Christ, catching a glimpse of God's great love for us poured out through the passion of Jesus.

This liturgy is family time. This is intimate talk around the dinner table with Jesus' trusted community of friends. This is a meal at which Jesus takes the biggest risk with his disciples, speaking directly to them from the heart of God about his love for them. Jesus speaks to his beloved community and says. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

We are not commanded to love one another in order to win our way into God's good graces. No, far from it. We are already in God's good graces because of God's perfect love for all that she has made. "Love one another," he said, "even as I have loved you." It's the last part of that phrase that makes it all work. "We love because God first loved us." (John 4:19).

I wonder if we can think of this celebration of that meal long ago as a moment when a new family came into being? A family that is created through the willingness of Jesus to give all of himself away for the life of others.

A prayer in the Byzantine Liturgy expresses it this way.

He who is rich made himself lowly for our sakes: who would not be struck with wonder at the height of thy knowledge, which no mind can understand or tongue describe! Thou, the Creator of all, has drawn near to thy creatures of clay, and washed their feet and dried them with a towel.

What does it mean that God in Christ got up from the dinner table, tied a towel around his waist, stooped to pour water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet? Is God willing to serve in this way? Can we even comprehend it? This reading is too much for us. It's messed up. It overwhelms us and that is exactly what it is intended to do. The scriptures tell us that "Jesus loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Love. Love is at the center of this meal, love shown with basin and towel. The love of Jesus for his own demonstrated by his willing washing of their dirty feet. Their teacher, their superior, the one through whom all things were made, the Creator of all things stoops to cleanse their filthy feet. He washes them all; those who refuse, those who will betray, those who are flummoxed, those who are embarrassed, and those who are clueless. He washes them with Love, a love that opens up into new creation, new possibilities. He loves them in a way that turns the world upside down, and still can turn the world upside down.

Come my Joy, my Love, my Heart: such a joy as none can move; such a love as none can part; such a heart as joys in love.

He loved them as a servant, humbled himself as a servant washing feet just as he would soon humble himself in death on a cross.

Now if you are noticing resistance in yourself to this story, you are in good company. Peter was having none of it, “Lord you will not wash my feet!” What a blessing Peter’s defiance is to each of us. He demonstrates the absolutely normal resistance to Jesus’ love. We all know what it means to resist Jesus’ love, to live in our fears, to listen to the whispers of inadequacy to think ourselves unlovable. But Jesus answers him with compassion assuring him that he will understand and comforting him with words of belonging. Peter will eventually catch on to what Jesus is doing and he will also come to know how deeply connected he is to Jesus.

If Peter is to share in Christ’s life he must be part of the self-giving love that will bring Jesus’ life to an end.

Our lives are made up of gestures: a helping hand, a warm embrace, a smile, the serving of a meal, a clenched fist, the shaking of our head, the rolling of our eyes, the crossing of our arms. Gestures communicate a great deal: our emotions, our concerns, our care for one another our displeasure or anger. Jesus’ washing the disciple’s feet is a gesture of God’s self-giving love for the world. It’s a gesture that reveals the limitless of love of God

Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet is a powerful gesture. He gets up from table, takes off his outer garment, ties a towel around himself, pours water into a basin and stoops to wash his disciples’ feet. This is not just a practical action but a symbolic gesture meant to challenge

the disciples' understanding of the world. It is a gesture of love demonstrated in humble service. It is a gesture that anticipates his eventual death on the cross.

Jesus demonstrates a new way of being in the world, a new pattern of behavior that reverses the expected patterns. We are prone to think of ourselves before others. Our culture is obsessed with competition and winning promoting someone's success at the expense of another. We know these tendencies in ourselves only too well. We know the temptation to protect ourselves by making others look bad. So often we fail to help others because of its inconvenience to lives or its difficulty. Jesus takes up the towel and basin to challenge our assumptions about our own self-importance. He stoops to wash the disciples to demonstrate that life is found in living for the sake of others, in serving one another and looking toward the good of others.

In Jesus' faithful gesture the towel and basin become a subversive symbol of self-giving love. It is this self-giving way of life, this way of being in the world that makes Christian community possible, that shines light into the darkness around us, that awakens hope in the hearts of others, that demonstrates the love of God.

In taking up the towel and stooping to the basin, Jesus invites his disciples and all who follow to the way of love demonstrated in service. Sometimes I am awed by the loving service of this community: meals delivered to those experiencing a life transition or change, hospital rooms visited (I recently entered a hospital room that was full of St. Mark's members and it was almost a party), phone calls made just to

listen, prayers faithfully offered each day for the needs of this community, aging partners cared for, children's spiritual lives nurtured and cared for, the strong and beautiful hospitality offered and so much of it done without the need for recognition. Through our self-giving service to one another we make the presence of Christ tangible in our midst. Through our 10,000 acts of love we begin to build a community that points toward the Kingdom of God.

The towel and basin are symbols of love intended to transform the world and our community. The gesture of washing feet is not a ritual action to be confined to this building but rather a way of being in the world. Washing each other's feet is not a re-enactment of what Jesus did to his disciples but a gesture intended to teach us how to live faithfully in the world.

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life: such a way as gives us breath; such a truth as ends all strife: such a life as killeth death.