

Maundy Thursday
John 13.1-17, 31b-35
April 9, 2009
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

Imagine how surprised a hospital patient would be if she hit the call buzzer for a bedpan, and the doctor brought it in! How would corporate office staff react if the CEO got out of his chauffeur-driven limo and announced, “What does everyone want? I’m making the coffee run today!” What if the kindergarten teacher took it upon himself to clean up after his sick student instead of asking the office to send down a janitor to take care of the mess? Those would all be shocking role reversals, but nowhere near as dramatic as Jesus kneeling down and washing His disciples’ feet. Not even a slave could be ordered to wash feet, a humble and even humiliating task.

And how does St. John preface his account of the footwashing, how does he lead in to the story of Jesus’ passion and death?

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
(John 13.1b)

On the night before His death, Jesus opened the floodgates of His love even **more** than He had before, and drenched His disciples with humble, serving, self-sacrificing love. St. John’s Gospel is filled with signs, actions that point beyond themselves to something greater. Jesus’ love poured out in washing His disciples’ feet mirrors the Father’s love for us. The footwashing itself is a radical sign and prediction of Jesus’ death on the cross the next day.

I saw an acquaintance on Sunday and asked how she’s doing. She said, “Fine, but this is such a sad week” and looked absolutely pained. I immediately wondered what’s going on in her life and whether I should ask, when she added, “but I have to keep reminding myself of Easter at the end of it all,” and realized her sadness is linked to Holy Week and her sharing in Christ’s suffering as she remembers “the old, old story of Jesus and His love.” His story touches her

deeply. His story touches **us** deeply. That's why we're here tonight, and will be here tomorrow night, and Saturday night. His story **is** our story: the story of **His** love, met by our betrayals and denials, the story of our sorry failings and of His wholehearted, unhesitating, unquestioning forgiveness.

There are two important parts of the story that were left out of our Gospel tonight. After the poignant act of bathing His disciples' feet, a parable-in-motion teaching us about the depths of His love, Jesus predicts Judas' betrayal. Notice: Judas was present for the footwashing; Jesus did not balk at bathing the feet of the one who was on the brink of handing Him over to be crucified. Then, after Jesus gives that "new commandment," that we love another as He has loved us, after He issues that *mandatum* from which Maundy Thursday gets its name, He predicts that Peter will deny Him not just once, but three times before the rooster has a chance to herald the dawn.

Jesus washed Judas' feet, despite his betrayal. Jesus would die for Peter, despite his denial. Jesus hanged on the cross for those ramshackle disciples who would beat feet the moment that danger drew near. Jesus laid down His life for us, His current-day disciples, who are no more impressive than His first followers, no worthier of His astonishing love.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The word *telos* which has been translated as "the end" can also mean "completely," "totally."

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them utterly, endlessly, crazily. The gift He gave was all out of proportion to what they **deserved**, to what **we** deserve. But that is the nature of the love of God, who is in some ways like a doctor willing to bring the bedpan, a CEO willing to make the coffee run, a teacher willing to clean up the mess, a lover who continues to love even though the beloved betrays and denies.

John Donne, the English priest-poet, once wrote:

One of the most convenient Hieroglyphicks of God is a Circle; and a Circle is endlesse; whom God loves, hee loves to the end: and not only to their own end, to their death, but to his end, and his end is, that he might love them still.

Jesus is able to love us still because His crucifixion was followed by His resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand. As my friend said, we have to keep reminding ourselves "that Easter is at the end of it all," the earthly Easter we celebrate annually and the final Easter when God will raise us up, too, from the dead. Love will accomplish that, the unthinkable and "wondrous love" that we celebrate in these holy mysteries. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham