

## Maundy Thursday

“The love that asks no questions, the love that stands the test, That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best.”

Some of you will recognize these lines from Cecil Spring Rice’s patriotic hymn “I vow to thee my country.”

In context they refer to a soldier’s devotion to his earthly country, and no doubt there is a time and place for such devotion. As it has been said, “All paid some. Some paid all.”

Even so, these words equally describe the love Jesus manifested all the way to the cross.

His devotion was not to some earthly homeland, but to a heavenly. The cause which he “lays upon the altar, the dearest and the best” was your and my deliverance from sin and death.

Today is known as Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” is derived from *mandatum*, a Latin word which corresponds to our English word “commandment.”

On the night before His crucifixion, at the last meal Jesus and the disciples shared together, he gave them a *novum mandatum*, a new commandment that they should love one another. It was really not that new, but sometimes principles and lessons need to be repeated, expanded and illustrated so they may sink in. That is what good teachers do.

Well, Jesus was the best teacher, and this is what we find Him doing at the Last Supper.

Before we look at the specific way Jesus does this, let me say that love is a reoccurring theme throughout this evening’s passage of scripture.

First, we find **love declared**. “He loved them unto the end.”

What seems to be implied here is that Jesus loved His people represented by the disciples all the way to making the ultimate sacrifice on their behalf.

The cross was the great telos of Jesus’ ministry. It was the reason He came into the world. It was to undo the sin of Adam. It was to bring about reconciliation between God and man. It was to open heaven’s gates.

Throughout St. John’s Gospel, He refers to His death as "my hour".

On the cross the love Jesus declared at the Last Supper would be publicly displayed.

We move now from **love declared** to **love demonstrated** . . . the words Jesus spoke at the beginning of the passage is demonstrated in

what might be thought of as an acted-out parable.

I am, of course, thinking of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

As you probably are aware, washing feet was a part of Middle Eastern hospitality. You went to someone's house for a dinner party and the first thing that happened was a servant, usually the lowest, came and washed your feet.

It was more than a ceremony; it was a necessity. People in those days wore sandals and the roads were dusty or muddy.

The only thing is that this necessary social ritual did not happen at the last supper. Apparently, there was no servant at hand.

More than that, the disciples themselves were much too proud to take on this work.

I am reminded of a little boy here at St. Luke's 25 or 30 years ago who was asked by a youth leader to get a broom and sweep the kitchen. The group had been making cookies.

He looked at her with dismay and said, **“That’s ladies work.”**

Needless to say, that did not go over well with this youth leader.

Well, maybe the disciples thought something similar . . . “That’s servant’s work. We can’t possibly take it on.”

At this point Jesus sensed their hesitation and seized it as a teaching moment. The lesson He taught by it would be foundational in the new community He was establishing.

What does He do? He takes a towel and a basin and does the work of a servant. This is love that asks no questions demonstrated.

Of course, this same love is still needed in the Christian fellowship today. When it is not present, when people stand on their rights and cling to their prerogatives, then trouble comes.

For example:

--A person gets passed over when vestry selections are made, gets his feelings hurt and maybe leaves the church.

--A member of the choir gets miffed when someone else is asked to sing a solo.

--A clergyman is passed over at a civic lunch when it comes time to ask the blessing. A layman gets called on instead.

Unfortunately, happenings like these are all too common.

The Scottish Bible commentator William Barclay rightly notes the corrective:

**“The world is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling at the feet of their brethren.”**

When God’s people keep this principle in mind, most of the petty strife in local congregations will go away. Mission to those outside the walls of the building will be more effective.

At the same time, those within those walls will find themselves growing in understanding of the Gospel and serving in ways they could not previously have imagined, including stepping outside of their comfort zone, taking on jobs not in their ‘job descriptions’.

Love of this sort is what enables a church, any church, to make a difference in the world.

So far, we have looked at **love declared** and **love demonstrated**. We move now to **love enjoined**.

After Jesus had finished washing the disciples' feet, He sat down and explained what He had done and told them to follow His example:

**“If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.”**

Washing feet is to be part of the work of the Church in every generation.

When I say “washing feet”, I am not saying going through a ritual, though some do this on Maundy Thursday, and that's okay.

Indeed, there are sects that perform it at various times throughout the year.

I am reminded of a story I heard when I was growing up.

There was a naughty little boy who put soot from the coal grate in his father's socks before leaving for church.

When the preacher took off the man socks in preparation for washing his feet, the man's feet were black as coal.

The little boy no doubt thought it was funny, but I doubt his dad did.

What is Jesus saying here? Is he giving the church another rite, a quasi-sacrament?

No, the principal way we obey His command is not through physically washing feet but by performing lowly acts of service to others, beginning with those within the Christian family.

It is, as I have already suggested, by getting out of your comfort zone and getting your hands dirty.

Allow me to close with a story, actually a legend, that I think makes that point.

St. Francis of Assisi in his early days was a very self-possessed young man. He came from an aristocratic family and was very fastidious in his dress and habits.

But by all accounts, he was not happy. There was no peace in his soul.

Then, one day he was riding alone outside his home city, when he came upon a leper whose body was covered with soars. The site would turn the stomach of a strong man.

Ordinarily, Francis would have passed on, but not this day. Instead, something compelled him to dismount his horse and fling his arms around this man.

Then, according to this legend, he saw Jesus. He was the leper.

William Barclay, whom I quoted earlier, observed correctly: **“The nearer we are to suffering humanity, the nearer we are to God.”**

This is the love that stands the test . . . a hands-on, active and often discomfoting love.

This is the love that Jesus, declared, demonstrated and enjoined on that first Maundy Thursday.

Can people see this type of love in your life? If not, why not? Let Jesus be your teacher.