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March 24, 2016 (Maundy Thursday)
John 13:1-17; 31b-35

The Full Extent of Love

Maundy Thursday is the day on which we commemorate the institution of the Eucharist, by re-enacting Jesus' last supper with his disciples. That is why it is called Maundy Thursday; it comes from the Latin word, Maundate – "to command," because Christ commanded us, "do this for the remembrance of me." However, we almost always use the reading from the gospel of John that is about foot-washing and doesn't contain any of the familiar words from the last supper at all – no this is my body, no new covenant in my blood, poured out for you and for many, no actual dinner takes place in the passage. John actually doesn't ever recount that story; those words never appear and he has no institution of the Eucharist. Instead he offers this story about what Jesus is doing at the time of the last supper, and I think maybe this is his way of explaining the power of the Eucharistic feast to us.

On the night of the Passover supper Jesus is at table with his disciples, and he chooses the most demeaning task for himself. This shouldn't be shocking to us, since we're talking about a God who became human and a sinless being who look on sin, a man who ate with sinners and touched lepers; but somehow I think it is still unsettling to think of the Christ washing feet. He chooses to kneel down, with a basin and a towel, and wash his friends' dirty, dusty feet. The beauty of this story is that he makes no distinction between them. He likewise comes to James the faithful, John the beloved, Thomas the doubter, Peter the denier, and Judas the betrayer. He comes and washes all their feet in an act of servitude, and love. He says two things about this act that I want to ponder for a moment: He says that by this he would show the full extent of his love in this world. And that we, as disciples, should follow his example.

This is the full extent of his love? And we relegate it to one mid-week service during the year? Surely not. Surely the full extent of Christ's love for you and me was shown upon the cross – with his body broken and blood poured out, like we say in the Eucharistic prayer. Surely, John did not simply overlook the story of the institution of the Lord's Supper and decide to substitute this servant's foot-washing tale instead. No, I am sure that is not so.

This is John's institution story; it's just a new and refreshing perspective, as John is wont to do throughout his gospel. He teaches us a different way to look at the act of communion. And we do not confine the lesson to one service a year, but celebrate it every time we gather together for service, and hopefully every time we interact. The key to this story is Peter, who often, unknowingly or in a bumbling fashion, brings to light profound beauty and fumbles his way into the deepest of theological insights. Jesus comes to him and Peter refuses to let the master of the universe wash his feet. When Jesus explains to him that he must wash his feet so Peter can have a place with him, Peter asks for his whole body to be washed. Jesus tells him he is already washed clean, and so he need only have his feet washed. This as the first connection between foot-washing and the Eucharist. For those who have already been washed clean by Christ, we need only return to the communion table each week to refresh our souls, and to be reminded of, and renewed in the spirit of our salvation.

I am suggesting that the chalice and the bread are our modern basin and towel. The bread absorbs our shame and the wine cleanses our sin the way Christ's body absorbed the punishment meant for us and his blood washed away our transgressions. Indeed, Christ's service to us was on the cross and his continued love is shown in inviting us to the altar every week to wash us anew. Jesus invited each disciple there that night into communion with him, regardless of his sin, or what he would do to Jesus, of

what his present state was, and he invites us into that same community of saints every week regardless of the present peaks and valleys of our spiritual lives and our saintly qualifications. My soul is dirtied weekly in my walk through this fallen world in the same way that a person's feet would have been soiled traveling the ancient dusty streets of Jerusalem. Jesus' service at this meal is to wash the dust from my soul.

John has taken the beautiful but hard-to-grasp story of the Last Supper, whose finer points are argued over and often obscured with all its theology and transcendence and shown it to us in a new light, one easier to comprehend - a more practical and everyday view. Coming to the table is like a foot-washing, a refreshing from the travels and travails of life.

But what does this mean for us? That is the lesson that Christ wishes to teach in saying "you call me rabbi so learn from my example." How do we follow the example of Christ, our teacher. We will, of course, invite the wanderers, who have traveled long through this dirty world, saying come and we will wash your feet, we will cleanse your soul, you are invited into our community, and to our table, regardless of who you are, what you may have done, or what you may do. But this not primarily a story about welcoming strangers to the table. This story is about the twelve, a group that was familiar with one another, that argued over who was the greatest, and pointed fingers at who would betray. The lesson that may be far harder here is how we are to treat one another in our own community. We are to look at one another each week, and choose to commune - which means for many to act as one. You are to look at me knowing my faults and choose fellowship anyway, as each disciple certainly knew the shortcomings of the others, wondered why Jesus would kneel before that one, but still ultimately accepted him at the table.

We must go back to the part where Jesus calls this the full extent of his love. The reason this story is the full extent of Christ's love is this: he knew what these people would do to him in the next twenty-four hours, the failure to stay awake while he prayed in Gethsemane, the denial, the betrayal, all of it, and yet he chose to serve them. He knew they would all fail him, and yet he didn't factor that in. We are being asked to do the same. I need you to look on me, as one who is often the doubter, occasionally a denier, and sometimes even a betrayer of Christ and his church, one who will certainly fail you at times, and chose to accept me. And I am called to look on you, not blindly, but knowing your shortcomings, that you will hurt me, fail to support me, and choose to love you, to serve you, to share communion and be one with you.

This is true communion, and we see such a clear picture of it in foot-washing, because we come up in vulnerability, exposing dirty, smelly parts of ourselves to others, and they clean them rather than ridicule them. Because we share one basin and one towel we see a more tangible picture of what is true in the Eucharist. I place my feet in water muddied by others, and am dried with a towel already damp, and you take bread, broken from a loaf that has already absorbed much sin, and drink from a chalice into which I poured my earthly shame as I drank the wine. You're not being asked to wash anyone in whole, that was left to Christ, you are asked only to wash their feet, to share the light burden of their struggles in the world, serve the minor chore, shoulder the temporal shames.

On this night Christ taught us how to love, to truly love and accept and serve those whose faults we are intimately acquainted with in our community. How to love when you know you have been wronged and will be wronged again. How to love the imperfect and how to accept love. He taught us how to forget ourselves and our shortcomings and love because we see the light of Christ in all people. Tonight we learn that we are truly one body because we share one cup and one bread, are cleansed by one basin and one towel, because we accept, serve, and hope in one another because we follow the example of one truly great lover who, on the night on which he was betrayed and handed over to die, demonstrated the full extent of his love.