

Sermon – “Mandatum”
Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019
Scripture Reading: John 13:1-17, 31-35
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Tonight we hear from John’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus sharing a meal and his final teachings with his apostles before being arrested, tried, and put to death. Hear now God’s word in John chapter 13, verses 1 through 17 and 31 through 35.

^{13:1} Now 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. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then 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. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷ Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸ Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰ Jesus 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.” ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

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

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³¹ When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little 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.’ ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.”¹ So John’s Gospel introduces us to the events of the Last Supper and the betrayal and arrest which will follow it. Tomorrow night we will walk with our Lord through those things and all the way to the cross and the tomb. Tonight we join him and his closest disciples at the meal itself, where he gives his last words, telling of what he is doing and what they must do afterward.

There are a lot of them—words, that is—at least here in John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give just the basics of the Last Supper story, ranging from around three hundred thirty words to around five hundred and sixty. John, however, of which we only heard a tiny portion, devotes five whole chapters and thirty-seven hundred-some words to this event, sharing not merely the events which take place but Jesus’s last testament to his followers and the words of his prayers, lifted up to God on their behalf.²

There are two actions of Jesus at this supper which are foundational to our later understanding and practice. The first, his sharing of bread and wine as a sacramental enactment of the giving of his life which was about to occur, is told of in the first three Gospels.³ The second is told of here: his washing of the disciples feet, in an intentionally demonstrative act of servitude.

“If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,” he says, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example.”⁴ He establishes a precedent for humility that allows for little wiggle room: to refuse to lower yourself to the level of servant, to think your station or achievements in life excuse you from the undignified, uncomfortable, and grimy task of attending to one another thoroughly and personally, is to say you are above Jesus Christ himself.

Both the bread and wine and the foot washing point us at the center of the evening’s theme, the one for which our observance is named. “Maundy Thursday” is so-called because “Maundy” comes from “mandatum”, Latin for “command”, referring to the command Jesus gave his disciples that night. “I give you a new commandment,” he said, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”⁵

It is rightfully named, I think. Because this—Maundy Thursday—is not just a parade of memories or a symbolic celebration in thanks for something long past. We return to this moment every year because it still has something to tell us. There is a mandate issued, something meant to be taken beyond this supper, and beyond the death that will follow: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

“Just as I have loved you” is a tall order, coming from one who is about to bear the cross on your behalf. On this very evening was when the apostles were told, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”⁶

¹ From John 13:1 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² See Matthew 26:20-35, Mark 14:17-31, and Luke 22:14-38. John’s story of the Last Supper covers all of chapters 13 through 17 of John’s Gospel.

³ The institution of the Lord’s Supper is related in Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-23. Part of the story is also told, including the Words of Institution, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, which is believed by most scholars to have been written before even the Gospels themselves.

⁴ John 13:14-15 (*NRSV*).

⁵ John 13:34 (*NRSV*).

⁶ John 15:13 (*NRSV*), one verse after Jesus again repeats to them his command to love each other as he has loved them.

“Just as I have loved you” requires us to follow him, to walk in Jesus’s shoes as he treads that path to Calvary.

“Just as I have loved you” means doing as Jesus did, and setting before us the needs of those beside us, walking in the shoes of our neighbors.

This is no easy feat, but it is what we must offer the world. I read a disturbing report the other day. A researcher at Indiana University recently compiled decades of research surveying college-aged adults to gauge their levels of empathy, and found an unnervingly strong downward trend that seems to have begun around the year 2000, with students in 2009 measuring some 40% lower on empathy scales than their predecessors did thirty or forty years ago.⁷ Whether this reflects an intergenerational change or a culture-wide shift, it clearly suggests the total ability in our world to stand in other people’s shoes is measurably less than it used to be.⁸

But “just as I have loved you,” if it is really lived out, is a transformational thing with which we can face our world head-on. It is the sort of thing which infects the entire kingdom of this world with the vision of another. The disciples had their shoes removed and their feet washed by their Lord and Master, astonishing them and confusing them, and they learned beyond all doubt that he knew them and loved them. They put those same shoes back on and walked, then, in his footsteps, sharing the same total love that has astonished every person who has ever met it.

We can do that, too. If we fancy ourselves to be disciples also, then we are commanded to do so, in fact.

But it is not an easy road to follow, which you know if you have peeked ahead at all to the story which we will walk through together tomorrow night. We will need food and replenishment for the journey. Thankfully it is also on this same night that we are given the bread of life, for the one who commands us also sustains us. His own hands take up and clean the tired and dusty feet of his disciples. And so here, in this strange moment in which we are asked to put our faith and trust in someone just as he is about to die in seeming defeat, we gather to be nourished by him, the very meal we eat and drink both proclaiming his death and giving us life. Amen.

⁷ Hanna Rosin, “The End of Empathy,” <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/15/712249664/the-end-of-empathy> (April 15, 2019).

⁸ It should be noted that the fact of college students of one era being less empathetic than college students of another era could reflect one generation being less empathetic than its predecessors *or* the whole culture, including previous generations, having become less empathetic over time, and the latest college generation is only reflecting the state of the culture surrounding it. Since only college-aged people were surveyed, we do not have enough information to know which interpretation is correct. This is important to recognize, mainly to avoid jumping to premature conclusions about generations differing from one another.