

April 6, 2023

# Maundy Thursday

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Good evening, St. Anne's. Tonight is Maundy Thursday: "Maundy," related to the words "mandate" and "commandment," signifies the night before Jesus' death in which he tells and shows his disciples a new commandment, the commandment to love. As we just read, on this night some 2,000 years ago, Jesus, sitting around a final supper before his death sums up his ministry, his work on Earth, by telling his followers and companions, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn. 13). Jesus says, in effect, "you've been with me these past months and years, you've seen everything that I'm about, everything I stand for; now, my time here is growing very short; I'm not gonna be with you much longer, and so I want to emphasize to you that when it's all said and done, the final word of my work, my ministry, my life is love. And it's up to you now: because of love, I'm soon going to be killed, but I now entrust to you, my followers, the mission of loving one another."

Now Jesus does not just say this but he also shows this; he doesn't just command his followers to love each other without backing up his words with concrete action. And we see this action of love at the beginning of our Gospel passage where Jesus literally enacts the role of a menial servant or slave, demeaning

himself to wash the feet of his followers (which, significantly, even includes Judas, Jesus' betrayer, because Judas has not yet left the table to backstab Jesus when Jesus washes his feet). This washing is shocking, even scandalous, behavior: particularly in the culture of Jesus' day, for a respected teacher to get down on the ground and wash the feet of his pupils was an unimaginable act of self-debasement, violating all norms of hierarchy and decorum.

But as amazing as this selfless, loving action is, what I want to focus our attention on tonight is not so much the action itself as much as the verse immediately preceding Jesus' washing his disciples' feet, a verse which is extremely important because it tells us how and why Jesus was able to embrace such a demeaning role for the sake of love.

In 13:3, just before Jesus takes up the servant's towel, we read: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God... [washed his disciples' feet]." "Jesus," in other words, "knowing who he was, knowing what he had, knowing where he came from, and knowing where he was going..."—this knowledge of personal identity (who he is) and of his past and his future is presented here by John as the essential foundation for the unimaginable act of love that follows. Why is this knowledge so crucial? How does knowing one's history and one's destiny open the door to a life of love?

Let me briefly suggest three things: we can see in Jesus' actions that his knowledge about himself, and especially his deep conviction that he "had come from God and was going to God" enabled: 1) a clear sense of mission and purpose for his life; 2) radical freedom; and 3) selfless love.

First of all, a clear sense of mission and purpose: Jesus' clarity about who he is, where he comes from, and where he's going leads to clarity about how to act—not just day-to-day but, significantly, here in the last hours of his life, when he senses that his remaining time on Earth is very short. I can only guess at the range of intense emotions one might feel at such a time, emotions that might understandably lead one to break down in sorrow, to lash out in anger, or to quake in fear. But Jesus knows where he comes from and where he's going, and so rather than succumbing to any of these troubling emotions, he's able to see clearly what needs to be done, what his disciples still need to be taught, and then, with remarkable poise, he is able

to set aside whatever fears are churning within him in order to serve his disciples one last time. Moreover, he is able to stay the course, even when one of his closest friends (Simon Peter) rebukes him for his shocking behavior. In the midst of being criticized for his loving actions, Jesus not only perseveres in his scandalous conduct, but convinces Peter of the utter necessity of this counterintuitive path of love. This path which he is able to perceive and on which he is able to persist, because of Jesus' clarity about who he is, about where he comes from, and about where he is going.

Second, radical freedom: Clearly, as he washes his followers' feet, Jesus is not at all concerned about human social codes, or what others might think. He is free to serve scandalously: free of being concerned about his reputation as "respectable" rabbi; free from human standards of conduct and judgment. Moreover, he is also free from needing to satisfy his own emotional demands. It would have been very understandable for Jesus, sensing that his death was approaching, to selfishly say, "My last night, okay, I'm going to indulge: bring out the best wine, the most expensive Passover dishes—let's eat, drink, and be merry, for tonight is my last night with my friends." But because he is free from the power of his own emotions and self-serving desires, he has the capacity to step back, heed the quiet voice of God within him, perceive what is truly most important for his last hours on Earth and then use that time wisely. Knowing who he is in God, and that he has come from God and is going to God, makes Jesus radically free from all of these things—others' expectations and judgments, his own clamoring emotions, fears, and desires—such that he can perceive what is really needed in the moment and then boldly and freely act accordingly.

Action which brings us thirdly and finally to selfless love: Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet is no minor deed. It's nothing less than a small death before the big death, a dress rehearsal for the main act coming the next day. Because Jesus knows who he is, where he's from and where he's headed, he is free in this "little death," this act of selfless love, to die to the concern for status, to die to the social demands of being respectable, to die to the need for a "good reputation." Because he's confident about his origin and his destiny, he is utterly free to just love, whatever the cost: he is able to do whatever is needed in the moment to love those around him without getting tripped up by that most annoyingly persistent of questions, "what will other people think?" Jesus,

knowing who he is and where he's headed post-death, is not held back by what other people might think, and so he is able to just love—radically, selflessly, truly.

What a wonderful way to live! Just try to imagine how delightful, how joyous it would be to have Jesus' freedom—utterly free from all concerns about status, reputation, and the judgments of others; totally free to sense God's still, small voice within him, guiding him to a clear sense of his purpose and mission; totally free, then in turn, to simply follow this deepest desire of his heart, loving his companions with shocking selflessness.

How do we get this kind of freedom? How can we experience liberation from fear (fear of death, fear of others' judgment)? How can we be set free to follow the deepest desire of—what I believe to be—all human hearts, that is, to give and receive love, truly, selflessly?

We have to know where we come from and where we are going. We have to know from whom we come and to whom we will go. We have to know that we come from the God who loves us and are going to that very same loving God. What an amazing origin; what a thrilling destiny! For each of us to have come from the perfect Love which is God and to be heading back into that very same heart of joy. Do you know this? Do you know this truth deeply, in your bones, in your heart of hearts?

We can't give what we don't have. If we want to live out of the radical freedom and joy of Jesus, a freedom that enables a joyfully selfless love of others, then we need first to receive that freedom, that joy, and that love from the God who is Love itself. And how do we do that? Jesus shows us the way: knowing where we come from and where we are going; locating our life stories, our origin and our destiny, in the God of Love.

So I invite you this Maundy Thursday evening—on this night when we commemorate Jesus' Last Supper, Jesus' "new commandment" of love, and Jesus' radically loving act of washing his followers' feet—I invite you this night to open your heart to this God of Love, to find yourself and your life story—your origin and your future—in this loving God. If you feel you've already done so, then open your heart a little bit more, allow God to go a little bit deeper. Invite our God of Love to have a little bit more access, a little bit more control, setting each of us a little bit more free to serve our companions—and the world around us—with joy and with love. Amen.