



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday

A People of Love

[RCL]: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

It had been a busy week. We finally made it to Jerusalem with Jesus, and not a moment too soon. The city was crowded! It was the week of the Passover celebration and it seemed as though every man, woman, and child for a hundred miles was in the city of Jerusalem. People were everywhere. Every shop, tavern, and stall had a line of people just waiting to get in. The city was not built for this many people, and yet here they were. Luckily, we had a place to stay. Jesus had seen to that. He seems to have friends just about everywhere and we had a really nice, big room to celebrate the Passover feast together above the store of an oil merchant from Jericho, whose brother Jesus had healed.

When we first got to Jerusalem earlier in the week, Jesus was met at the Damascus Gate by a crowd of people singing, “Hosanna in the highest!” and calling him the “Son of David”. We were all afraid. Pontius Pilate and the army were showing the might of Rome as they entered the city from the main gate. But even with our little mocking parade, there were still some Roman spies keeping an eye on Jesus. And of course, Jesus was about his usual business of teaching, healing, and preaching—no matter how many times we told him he needed to be careful, he was determined.

We had heard rumors that the authorities were trying to find a reason to arrest Jesus. I mean, if you go around preaching that God loves everyone, calling out religious leaders, turning social norms on their heads, and challenging the authority of Rome, something is going to happen. So tonight, here we are in the upper room with Jesus, sharing the Passover meal. A mixture of nostalgia and fear as we tell the ancient stories of our redemption and salvation.

In the middle of the meal, Jesus takes up the servant’s towel and basin and starts to wash our feet. We had eaten Passover with Jesus before, but somehow this one seems oddly different. Why is he suddenly wanting to wash our feet? Something must be wrong. This isn’t how things are supposed to be. Washing feet is a servant’s job, not a job for our master and teacher.

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

I couldn't let Jesus do it. I just couldn't. He had taught me so much. I had left fishing to follow him and now he wants to wash my feet.

"You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

I'm not too concerned about later; I'm worried about now. None of this makes sense. The others might be okay with this, but I am not. Why is Jesus suddenly acting so strange? I won't let this happen.

"You will never wash my feet." I don't believe it. After all the walking we had done today, our feet are tired and sore and now he wants to wash them like a common servant?

"Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." That's not fair. I left everything to follow you. But if this is what you want...

"Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

"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."

After he washed our feet, we were silent. A heaviness filled the air. We didn't know what to do. Jesus starts speaking but I am really not listening; I am still trying to make sense of him washing our feet. Then he says something that makes my ears perk up.

"Where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Lightbulb. That is what all of this had been about. All the preaching, teaching, feeding. It's about love. It's all about love. It's about how we love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. His washing our feet, his sharing the Passover meal, his outrageous behavior all along was to show us what love looks like. Traveling with Jesus for so long, we can sometimes forget that his message is about loving deeply, truly, and earnestly. All of what we had done and seen in following Jesus suddenly made sense in this one moment at supper.

Now that I think about it, it was always there in the many miracles we witnessed, the people we saw healed and transformed. We saw that love in Photini, the Syrophenician woman at the well, longing to be a part of a community who loved. We had our eyes opened when he healed Bartimaeus, who even in his blindness saw love so clearly in Jesus. Strangely now, in this upper room, having had our feet washed and having celebrated the Passover meal, it's starting to make sense.

And now that the food and dishes have been cleared away, we are supposed to go to Jesus' favorite place to pray, and here is Jesus coming to the table with a cup of wine and a loaf of bread...

On this night, the night before he died, Jesus reminds us again that our commission, our call, our command, is to be a people of love. Too often, we as the Church can, like Simon Peter, get so caught up in being the Church, in worrying about our worship, our ministries, our mission, that we lose sight of Jesus' command to love one another.

Loving one another is perhaps the most difficult of commands. It means that we have to first learn to love ourselves—see ourselves as worthy of accepting, giving, and sharing love. Jesus not only spoke kind words and did great deeds—he comforted and healed and gave hope for a brighter future. He embodied love. We are called to do the same. Our world cries out to see the face of Jesus, to walk the way of love, to experience a church that not only preaches love—but demonstrates love.

Singer and songwriter Tina Turner famously asked, “What’s love got to do with it?” For we who would follow Jesus, the answer is simple: *everything!* Our inability to live what we preach about love would remove Christ from our Christianity. If we as the Church are to be relevant or meaningful in our world, we must rediscover that hope-filled love that enflamed Jesus' first followers and inspired a movement that changed the world.

Our challenge is to be a people of love, to live the words we pray and sing a faith that loves. And perhaps we can embody the words of Peter Scholtes, knowing that together,

We will work with each other, we will work side by side.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side.

And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride,

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

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