



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday (A)

[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

Back Against the Wall

Take a moment to picture the context in which Jesus lived. Howard Thurman reminds us, in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, that Jesus's social location matters. We lose an understanding of Jesus—the implications and application of his teachings—when we fail to understand the *thickness* of his context. Thurman places specific emphasis on Jesus's background: Jewish, poor, without rights of citizenship, and living under Roman occupation. He places Jesus alongside those whose “backs are against the wall.” Take a moment to reflect on the time, space, and way that Jesus—and other Jewish people—lived during this period of alienation and limited freedom.

As Thurman notes, the Jewish people of Jesus's time—and across time—had to deal with the question of what attitude they would take toward the rulers and others who controlled their context's political, social, and economic life. Jesus (and others) must deal with this in terms of their practical life, their vocation, and their place in society. How will they engage the world, their neighbors, and see themselves?

Thurman advances the position that Jesus—and those whose backs are against the wall—have four alternatives: non-resistance through imitating those in power; nonresistance through cultural isolation; resistance through violence; and lastly, Jesus' choice to love—even one's enemy. Loving “so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.”

These considerations shaped the thick context in which Jesus lived his life. This is the backdrop in which Jesus finds himself in his last days. He is aware that his time on earth is coming to an end. The gospel says, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.” Even with this knowledge, he continues to live, teach, and embody the alternative of love: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

On Maundy Thursday, we are called to examine more closely the choice to love exercised by Jesus. Consider two foundational questions: Can we accept the love of Jesus in the way that Jesus extends himself to us? Flowing from that question is a second: Are we willing to continuously extend our love in Jesus's way—both as it is modeled in the foot washing and commanded via the “*mandatum*” (man' dātəm) of Maundy Thursday? “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

We learn in today's gospel that during supper, Jesus took off his outer robe and tied a towel around his body. The gospel details both his preparation and the act of his washing the feet of the disciples. We can glean from the text that some of them accepted this embodied hospitality, service, and love extended by Jesus. Others resisted.

This was an act that subverted the cultural and social hierarchy of the day: The master teacher places himself squarely in service to his students, followers, or disciples. This is a counter-cultural act of the highest order.

Ultimately, it proved too much for at least one disciple. We hear Simon Peter tell Jesus, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answers, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter resists further, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answers, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," and Peter submits.

How easy it is for us to fail to see ourselves as Simon Peter. Many of us are quick to assume we would be the first in line to have Jesus wash our feet. But would we?

At the core of the interaction between Jesus and Simon Peter lies the question of our will to receive the love of Jesus *in the manner and time* that Jesus extends it to us. It is easy for us to receive Jesus in the way we desire and at our hour of need. But what about in manners that we would not choose, at times that are not based on our need? Jesus, the master teacher, demonstrates that we are called to accept his love as a part of the divine mutuality and relationship desired by God. The Way he models is not grounded in a hierarchy of human value. Rather, it is grounded in a love that humbles itself, extending itself to others to be repeatedly shared with others.

Michael Marsh characterizes the washing of feet during Maundy Thursday as "intensely personal." He invites us to "strip bare the altar of our life, to be washed and come clean." He asks us, "What is the one thing you need to remember tonight that will let you walk in peace, step into a new way of living, repair a relationship, risk loving more deeply, more courageously pursue justice?"

Marsh's words echo Thurman's perspective and strike to the core of what former Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, taught about Jesus's "Way of Love." Our invitation this Maundy Thursday is to embrace our vulnerability sufficiently to receive the love of Jesus as it is presented, and to understand through that the power and liberation of a different way of being.

Timothy Adkins-Jones wrote about this opportunity in a piece for Christian Century, "Love is an action word. . . More than a feeling, love is a practice. And in offering us this ritual of washing another's feet, Jesus leaves a practice of love for us to maintain." Jesus's teaching and his actions this night invite us to deepen our understanding of love—by extending it to others.

As we engage in the washing of feet today—a ritual not common to us—we are forced to do something that is not routine. It disrupts our comfort and pushes us toward a proximity with others that may be uncomfortable for us (and for them). In this we are invited to grapple with the second question posed earlier: "Are we willing to continuously extend our love in Jesus's way—both as it is modeled in the foot washing and commanded via the "*mandatum*" of Maundy Thursday?"

Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and then charged them to mirror his actions by washing the feet of others. The events of that night serve as a commission—a commission to follow the same missional charge that Jesus not only taught but also enacted in the washing of his disciples’ feet. After the foot washing, Jesus says, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

The charge is amplified through the “*mandatum*” of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus instructs the disciples how to live in relationship to one another and the world. He tells them, “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.”

In his last days, when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and gave this new commandment, he did so against a backdrop of chaos and threat. The backdrop faced by Jesus and the larger community is not so different from ours. Today we live in a world of increasing disruption and chaos. It is a time of conflict and war. So many live with their backs against the wall.

Reflect tonight on the ways your back—or your neighbor’s back—may be against the wall. Reflect on Jesus’s alternative way in trying and lamenting times: a way that washes feet and extends selfless love. He modeled for us a love that continues to pour itself out and serve others against a backdrop of threat and vulnerability. In these trying times, can we do the same? This is Jesus’s invitation. It is our work. *Amen.*

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