

**Maundy Thursday: Holy Trinity Church: April 13, 2017**

**John 13: 1-17, 31b-35: *Maundy Thursday, Love and Service***

**Preached**

**By**

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**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.**

***Mandatum Novum Do Vobiscus*; a new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**

**It is from this first word, *mandatum*, commandment, that Maundy Thursday gets its name. How so remarkable, how so unforgettable, how so beyond human comprehension that Jesus would give this commandment on the very same night to the very same people who would betray him, deny him and in the end desert him. These were the very same people he loved so much.**

**My very first foot washing came when I was a deacon at St.Luke's Church in East Greenwich. I knelt on the floor and washed the feet of the people of the parish. I washed and dried a narrow, yellow-skinned foot that characterized an Asian ancestry, a perspiring foot that betrayed discomfort in a public setting, a small alabaster foot of a child so dainty that it snuggled neatly into the palm of my hand, a foot so big that I almost laughed as water ran onto the floor as it was larger than the circumference of the bowl, a trembling foot of a**

**very confident and prominent businessman that caught me completely by surprise, a heavily veined foot that showed the sign of advancing age.**

**In those feet I saw the whole world come together. I knelt before a microcosm of the world, its people and their needs--without regard to race, sex, age or status, including the rich and the poor, the brilliant and the troubled, the old and the young, the clumsy and the dainty, the calm and the anxious, the secure and the fearful. I knew all of the people face-to-face as deacon, but until that moment I did not know them hand-to-foot as their servant. The lesson I learned will never be forgotten. My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the message is simply this, when we kneel as servants at the foot of the cross, the whole world comes together in a life of service.**

**A ceremony of foot washing can be a powerful experience. But that is not the real focus of Christ's teaching. The real focus is that we should be one another's servants. This is Christ's will for us, that we should love one another and serve one another as he served us.**

**The scene from John's Gospel this evening is the upper room. Slowly and silently Jesus rises from the table and gets to his feet. His face shows the pain he feels knowing that even now the disciples do not understand. He loosens the belt which holds his robe, and lays it aside. He picks up the towel lying**

there and wraps it around himself. He no longer looks like any Messiah the disciples envision and hope for because now, he looks like a slave.

One by one each disciple is silenced. There is only the splashing of the water being poured over dirty feet into a basin.

Each disciple swallows hard and tries to get hold of himself. "This cannot be happening," each thinks to himself. But it is. It is on to Thomas, and Simon, and Philip and John and Andrew. The reaction is always the same. Still no one can utter a word. Now it's Judas Iscariot's turn.

Jesus kneels down, and begins to pour the water over the feet of Judas. With tender compassion, he bathes the feet of one set to betray him.

Judas thinks to himself, "I was wrong about this man. He almost had me convinced that he was the Son of God, the Messiah. But look at him! He looks like any slave. Can this be the Son of God? Does the great God of the universe come down in such a humbled form as this, a foot washer? He says to himself, "No, No, this is impossible." So Judas lies there feeling good about himself and what he is about to do. He has finally seen through this charlatan and the act which Jesus has been putting on.

Poor old Judas is not a great deal unlike any of us. We do not feel down deep that God really does do everything he can to win our faith, even if it means getting down on his knees. Jesus shows in a dramatic but humble way that

throughout salvation history, God has always gone to the greatest length to save his people. We heard in the very first verse from John's Gospel this evening that Jesus loved his people: The evangelist tells us, "*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end*". Jesus shows us the full extent of his love.

You see, the hardest thing for us to accept is our own acceptability before God. We have no problem believing God loves people like Mother Theresa, Padre Pio or the Little Flower. But down deep inside, where belief really matters, we have not come to grips with the fact that God loves and accepts us just the way we are. Ours is a God who gets down on his knees before us to say in the most dynamic way God can, "You are loved, and you are forgiven, you are acceptable. You are loved beyond your wildest imaginations." God became one of us in and through Jesus of Nazareth and so God himself came. God from God. Light from Light. True God from True God. Begotten not made." This very act of coming into this world is so shockingly humble that many people miss it. They feel God belongs in the heavens or maybe down here in the temples and the cathedrals. God belongs anywhere, but God does not really belong walking around in our midst. What I say may sound sacrilegious and even quite strange, but many of us have too high a view of God. This view says that God could not really love me, certainly not like I

truly am. On the other side, we have too low a view of ourselves. We think, we've done so many terrible things, that God could not possibly love and accept us. Yet, here is God on Jesus knees, saying to all of us, "Yes, I do accept you, the question is can you accept me?"

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, if my words ring true in your heart, I hope and pray that you are now beginning to feel the truth of God's love break in upon you. Down into the depths of your souls I hope and pray you are beginning to wonder what it would be like if you could believe for one minute that God really wants you here and now, just the way you are. Having faith in God is primarily trusting in the trustworthiness of our Lord. Jesus has done all that he can do to say to us, "Come and be mine." Can you refuse the God who gets on his knees to show that he cares for you and loves you?

If I stopped here, the story would be only half told. Let's return to the upper room to see the other half of the story. Judas has left the building and there is our old pal Simon Peter. As we say in Rhode Island, not for nuthin, but you really have to love Peter because he is truly one of us.

Simon Peter did not always say the right thing, or do the right thing. But he took up Christ's cross, the cross of servant hood.

There was a successful executive on the rise in his corporation who every Tuesday night volunteered at a foot clinic for homeless people. He wore nice

clothes and he wore his success comfortably, but at the clinic he would sit on a stool before a homeless guest, take the guest's feet and place them in a basin of warm water. After washing them, he took a towel and dried the feet, applying ointment to their sores. When asked why he did this, the man answered, "I figure I have a better chance of running into Jesus here than most places." I think that is a pretty good explanation. And it is a challenge to the rest of us.

I love the way Ruth Calkin put it in her poem, titled *I Wonder*:

**You know, Lord, How I serve you**

**with great emotional fervor in the limelight.**

**You know how eagerly I speak for You at a Women's Club.**

**You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.**

**But how would I react, I wonder,**

**if You pointed to a basin of water**

**and asked me to wash the calloused feet**

**of a bent and wrinkled old woman**

**day after day, month after month,**

**in a room where nobody saw and nobody knew? I wonder.**

**My sisters and brothers, does that challenge you? It does me. Maundy Thursday is that day in the church year in which we humbly take the bread and the cup of wine and in the breaking of the bread and in the drinking of the wine we meet the humble servant, Jesus the Christ. But let's not forget why it was called 'Maundy' in the first place. It was at the Last Supper that Jesus says to his disciples, all of us: "A new command I give you: Love one another." The bread and the cup are important to us as disciples of Jesus. But so are the towel, the basin and the water because that is where we meet Jesus Christ in a humble life of service to others. It is only in and through a life of humble service where we will find our greatest success. It is only in and through a life of humble service where we discover who we are and what we are. It is only in and through a life of humble service that we will find the key to our greatness. AMEN.**

