

“Community and Service”
St. Paul’s United Church of Christ
Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2021

Friends in Christ, we are now at the fifth day of Holy Week, known as Maundy Thursday.

In John’s gospel, all the significant events in the ministry of Jesus occurred in and around Jerusalem at or around the feast of Passover. Passover is a major Jewish festival which commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and lasts seven or eight days. Jews from all around the world were encouraged and expected to be there. Passover is to the Jewish people as the Fourth of July is to Americans.

You can read about the first Passover as it is recorded in 12th Chapter of Exodus. If you have seen the movie, *The Ten Commandments* you realize how serious the event was.

The first Passover took place prior to the tenth and final plague that God sent down on Egypt, and Pharaoh finally released the Hebrews from slavery. God instituted the Passover as a remembrance and for over 3,000 years it is still being observed, a testament of God’s covenant with his people.

Passover was meant to be observed in the community. On the first night of Passover, a meal called the Seder. Originally, it called for a lamb to be shared and eaten. A one-year old lamb weighs 50 to 60 pound, making it way too much for most families to eat so it needed to be shared with others. It became a communal event.

I have had the opportunity to be a part of two enacted (Christian) Seder meals. It has a very moving liturgy taking the celebrants back to that first Passover. The liturgy for every step of the meal was very deliberate, and took us reminded to that first night recalling God’s power and release of the Hebrew slaves. No, we did not have roasted lamb at either.

Similarly, when we take communion, we are sharing the observance with others. Even home communion is joining with other believers.

Now, we turn to John’s gospel.

Unlike the Synoptic accounts, Jesus’ last meal with the disciples in John is not the Passover supper. It cannot be, since for John, Jesus will die as the ultimate Passover Lamb on the Day of Preparation (John 19:14). Rather than focusing on the food and drink as symbols of a new covenant, Jesus uses this moment to symbolize his type of love to his disciples by washing their feet and sharing a morsel of his own food with his betrayer (John 13:26-30). Focusing on the foot washing, the symbolic element of Jesus’ actions becomes clear when we look at

John's description. Jesus' movements should remind readers of his statement in John 10:17 where he says he "lays down" (*tithēmi*) his life "so that [he] might take it up again" (*hina palin labō autēn*, see also 1 John 3:16). In John 13:4, Jesus "lays down" (*tithēsin*) his clothes, washes his disciples' feet, and then "takes" (*elaben*) them back again in verse 12. Jesus' washing thus symbolizes his death and resurrection that he endures on behalf of disciples and the world. At the same time, however, it also shows us that serving one another through the lowering of ourselves is also complete love. Rather than just dying for one another, then, Jesus gives his disciples an example of what it means to love one another by living as well. In fact, this is exactly the message Jesus gives at the end of our lectionary passage in verses 34-35: I am giving you a new commandment: love one another, just as I loved you **so that** you might love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you should have love for one another.

In other words, Jesus came **so that** he might show us how to love.

In our text, as just mentioned, Jesus behaves most unexpectedly as He sets forth an example for the disciples and for believers of all ages. Hear these words from John 13:

13 Before the Festival of Passover, Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully.

² Jesus and his disciples were sharing the evening meal. The devil had already provoked Judas, Simon Iscariot's son, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew the Father had given everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God. ⁴ So he got up from the table and took off his robes. Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing. ⁶ When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not understand what I am doing now, but you will understand later."

⁸ "No!" Peter said. "You will never wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you will not have a place with me."

⁹ Simon Peter said, "Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!"

¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Those who have bathed need only to have their feet washed, because they are completely clean. You disciples are clean, but not every one of you." ¹¹ He knew who would betray him. That is why he said, "Not every one of you is clean."

¹² After he washed the disciples' feet, he put on his robes and returned to his place at the table. He said to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? ¹³ You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you speak correctly, because I

am. ¹⁴If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. ¹⁵I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do. ¹⁶I assure you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷Since you know these things, you will be happy if you do them.

³¹When Judas was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Son of Man in himself and will glorify him immediately. ³³Little children, I am with you for a little while longer. You will look for me—but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now—'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

³⁴"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. ³⁵This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

May God bless our hearing of his holy word.

Have you ever wondered where the term Maundy Thursday came from? Sara Koenig, in her notes on the text found in Working Preacher, writes this:

"The name of this day in the church calendar, Maundy Thursday, derives from the Latin translation of John 13:34, included in the gospel reading for today. Jesus gives his disciples a "new commandment" — a *mandatum novum* — that they love one another as Jesus has loved them."

Washing the feet of guests was an expectation in Jesus' day. They did not have paved streets or even sidewalks. People and animals walked down the street. People's feet, even when wearing sandals, were dirty. One question I have is why one didn't or more of the disciples attend to this chore? Of course, there is no answer. A teacher was not supposed to wash his disciples' feet. It was about as menial task as it could be. Jesus, again, didn't follow the norms of the day.

Then Jesus rises and performs this task. He was teaching right until the end. He was setting an example of servitude for his disciples to follow after His Ascension. He demonstrates that "loving each other" has more to it than simply using those words. Love means serving others.

A corollary to loving others is that we must be willing to allow others to love us. Not only is loving with Jesus' type of love difficult, so is receiving it. It is a two way street.

When we read in the Gospels about the Jesus' ministry, it was important to restore those in need be healed and returned back into the community. The community is to care for one another. We read, watch, and/or listen to the news, we are reminded how much more work is needed to bring the community together. What would possess someone to do a mass shooting? Why are there hungry people? Why are there homeless persons? Why is there racism and sexism and all

the other isms? Why is there injustice? And the list unfortunately goes on and on.

There is much work to be done to bring God's Kingdom here on earth. If we are following the example of Jesus of humility and service as found in this text, then each of us should and can do little things to make the community a better place for all. When Jesus was asked "Who is my neighbor?" he responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a person in that day who would have been despised by the people of Israel. He is essentially saying that there are no limits on who is a neighbor, not just the person next door, but anywhere in the world.

While it is true that a lot of bad things have been done over the centuries in the name of Jesus, it is also true that a lot of wonderful things have been done on his behalf, taking care of his children. Believers are called to serve others, some in person and some by supporting others.

The theme of this year's One Great Hour of Sharing in the UCC Church is "Let Love Flow". We do this in community, both in person and virtual. If we work together, much greater things can be accomplished. After all, who is your neighbor? Anyone who needs us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.