

The First Passover

Our first passage this evening, from Exodus, recalls the first Passover. The ancient Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and to set them free, God unleashed ten plagues on Egypt. The last plague, the death of the firstborn, was the worst. When the Egyptians woke up the next morning, Pharaoh was more than happy to send them packing into the desert wilderness – until he changed his mind, and drowned in the Red Sea. The Passover meal became an annual celebration for the Jewish people – and the Passover meal is precisely what’s occurring in John’s gospel.

Oftentimes we think of Maundy Thursday as the day we remember the institution of the Lord’s Supper – the “maundy” comes from Latin *mandatum*, or mandate. Historically, the mandate from which Maundy Thursday gets its name is not about Holy Communion but rather about foot washing. Or – more accurately put – Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ confusion and alarm after He washed their feet. Have you ever thought about Christ washing the feet of the disciples?

Jesus is the epitome of humility. God-in-the-flesh comes down to live with us, and then when His disciples won’t be humble, He humbles Himself by removing His clothing, wrapping Himself with a towel, and washing their feet. The act of foot washing goes beyond hygiene – it’s the embodiment of spiritual truths about humility, service, and mutual care. In a few moments, we’ll have the opportunity to practice a spin on foot washing – we’ll do a ritual hand washing before receiving Communion. When the time comes, you’ll come up in pairs, and take turns scooping and pouring water over each others’ hands. Going back to foot washing, Jesus even washed the feet of Peter – who would deny knowing Him three times before dawn the next morning. He even washed the feet of Judas Iscariot – His betrayer. Judas had already made up his mind to betray Jesus.

Ongoing Need for Repentance and Renewal

Jesus’ words to Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me,” (John 13:8), underscore the need of spiritual cleansing if we want fellowship with Christ – it emphasizes the ongoing need for repentance and renewal. What do you suppose Judas was thinking while Jesus was kneeling in front of him, washing his feet? I sometimes wonder if there was an instant when he thought that maybe he was making a horrible mistake. When Jesus looked into Judas’ face as He got ready to move on to the next disciple, what thoughts do you suppose flashed through their minds? Did Jesus have sad eyes, knowing He would soon suffer terribly because Judas had sold Him out? Or were they firm, because Jesus knew what He had to do to save us all, and Judas was the vessel being used to get Jesus to the cross?

I wonder, too, how the other disciples felt when it was all said and done by Good Friday afternoon. They were hiding behind locked doors. It was easy for them to love Jesus – it's easy for us to love Jesus – but then we're supposed to start including others. Loving others is the hard work of the gospel. Following the foot washing, Jesus tells His disciples – and us also – some important instructions. First He says, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you," (verses 14-15).

There's a fine line between being too independent and not dependent enough. There are a lot of people in Shelby County tonight thinking – and wanting – this faith thing to be an internal, belief relationship just between them individually and Jesus. It's not designed that way, at least from what He tells His disciples in this passage. He includes the whole world – and especially people within the community of faith, which brings us to the second important instruction Jesus gives. He tells us it's a new commandment.

Love One Another

Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another," (verses 34-35). In two short verses, Jesus tells us to "love one another," three times. What is it that He wants us to do? "Love one another!" This commandment contains the essence of Christian ethics and community – rooted in the love of Christ.

Jesus gives us a sign of what our love is to look like. Our love for others, and for each other, is to look like His love. What does that look like? His love is all-inclusive, all-welcoming. He spread His strong arms wide open on the cross of Good Friday to show the lengths to which God would go for love's sake.

It's not about which specific local church we're part of, or how many Bible passages we read, or the acts of kindness that we do. It isn't how many minutes we spend in worship each week over the course of our lives – or living lives of pure moral character for that matter. None of that shows that we belong to Jesus Christ – that's all stuff we should be doing anyhow. Jesus tells His disciples – and us tonight – "Everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another." It's about what comes out of us.

Everyone Will Know

How do we show our love for others? That's a question of the utmost importance on this Maundy Thursday night. Who has shown us love like Christ's love? We come together to remember Him, what He did for us, and how He suffered for us. But we can't help but hear the command with which He left His followers. When we receive the

bread and cup, we hear His words echoing in our heads – “love one another.” It’s harder to do than it should be. It’s harder to do than we want it to be.

Jesus, by linking love for one another with His own sacrificial love, elevates love to the highest virtue. The love He’s talking about is the real deal – sacrificial love, just like His. He was willing to go to the cross for us. Are we willing to face the cross for Him? It’s probably easier for us to do here in America, than it is for our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. Followers of Jesus in some countries are put to death by their nation’s leaders.

Here, we have the benefit of living in community – the community of faith. Being able to physically assemble together is a great privilege – to be able to love in community. Who in this church family has made a difference in your spiritual life, and growth as a disciple? Who has been the “one another” for you?

For some of those “one anothers,” it’s been the words that you’ve said. For others, it has been the deeds you’ve done. And for others, it’s the gifts you’ve given, or the presence and attention that you’ve shown. This is the place where we can practice loving in an atmosphere of forgiveness and grace. We can learn how to love as He loved us. It’s not an easy task we’re called to do. Loving others takes time, sacrifice, and effort. Jesus didn’t say “Love the best you can, love with what is within you.” He said, “Love as I have loved you.” When we do that, we show people we are His!