

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Thursday, March 28, 2024
“Confront the unexpected”

Texts: John 13:1-17, 31-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Exodus 12:1-14

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good evening. Here we are at Maundy Thursday again. Here we are at the start of the Holy Triduum, the three holy days that prepare us for the joy we will celebrate at Easter in just a few days. The thing about the Triduum is that because the message of these services is so important, I usually say the same thing every year when I preach about them. But I was thinking to myself, what new thing can I discover about the lessons for Maundy Thursday, and the thing that jumped out at me was that exchange between Jesus and Peter, when Jesus asked to wash his feet and he was taken back. The disciple didn't expect to have his feet washed by the teacher, but this reversal was exactly the point. The new thing I saw is that the next three days are going to challenge the way we think things should be. The next three days are going to make us feel uncomfortable. The next three days are going to draw us in to being new people.

It must have seemed very strange to Peter to have Jesus wash his feet. It was a matter of status. In his mind, Jesus ranked higher than he did in their small, but growing circle of followers. He was the teacher. Peter was the disciple. The teacher shouldn't be washing the feet of the disciple. It just wasn't proper. Then, when he did give in, he wanted a bath. But, a bath was not the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach. Jesus was teaching a lesson in humility; that the leader must also be the servant of those whom he leads. Jesus was taking Peter out of his comfort zone. Peter would have much to learn before he eventually took his place as the head of the Church at Rome.

Jesus also took Peter and the other disciples out of their comfort zone by commanding them to love one another. Not a hard thing to do when you're among friends, but tonight's gospel skipped the part where Judas leaves the dinner party, goes, and betrays Jesus. How can you love someone who rats you out, who does you so wrong, who betrays your trust? That's exactly what Jesus needed them to know, because in the next couple days, Jesus would be handed over to the authorities, falsely thrown under the bus, as it were, by his own people, and then executed by the civil authorities as an innocent man. Yet, he loved us so much that not only did he forgive them, he opened the way for eternal life after finishing this one! Nobody else could even come close to doing something like that!

Thus begins our journey into the Triduum. It isn't Lent anymore. Tonight's liturgy focuses on the themes of servanthood and the Institution of the Eucharist. These two are linked, because the first is borne out of love, and out of that kind of love, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross, and for that we give thanks. Let's first look at the theme of servanthood. Jesus was about to leave his disciples on their own to carry his message forward. Sure, they were going to need courage. Of course, they would need some street smarts. But, they also needed to be humble. Their message was not

going to be one of force or coercion. Their message was not going to be one of war and violence. They were carrying the message of the Prince of Peace and it would be a challenge, because the rest of the world didn't operate that way. But that was the story they were commissioned to tell.

Now, foot washing may seem very strange to us nowadays. I cringe at the idea, myself, because I hate for other people to touch my feet, and I'm very ticklish. But back then, foot washing was a sign of extreme hospitality and was expected of the host. Just imagine living in an arid, almost desert, climate where the roads are dusty, traveling all day on foot in sandals. They didn't have asphalt streets and concrete sidewalks like we have today. So by the time you arrived at your destination, you were pretty dirty and dusty. Washing feet was a sign of hospitality. Usually it was the woman of the house who did it, like when Mary washed Jesus's feet with her hair and rubbed them with nard, just a few chapters earlier, but in a wealthier household, it would be a servant. Jesus challenged their expectations by washing the feet of his disciples; it was the master, Jesus, the teacher himself who took off his outer robe, put a towel around his waist, and washed the feet of his disciples. It was the ultimate example of role reversal. Jesus was the host, and yet he was the servant.

All of us, not just priests or other clergy, are servants. Jesus told the disciples to follow the example of their Lord and Teacher, to do to each other as he had done to them and wash each others' feet. At the end of the gospel story, Jesus gives them a new commandment, a *novum mandatum*, (that's where we get the word 'maundy' in Maundy Thursday): "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another." We are all called to love one another as Jesus loved his disciples and to be servants to each other. Service is an act of love toward another. Jesus showed his love toward his disciples by washing their feet, but Jesus also showed an act of even greater love for humanity in his willingness to die on the cross. Not what you'd expect these days, is it?

The other theme this evening is that of the Institution of the Eucharist. Ironically, this narrative does not show up in John's account of the last supper, but it is told in the other synoptic gospels and in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which we read as the second lesson. These are the words that we hear at every mass over the bread and the wine: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same manner, he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." They are part of the formula in the Eucharistic Prayer by which the ordinary bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. It was at this meal that Jesus linked the elements of bread and wine to his upcoming passion and death—his body and blood as victim for the ultimate sacrifice—but he also served as the host. He took bread, he gave thanks, and he broke it with his friends. This tradition of giving thanks was part of the Jewish *berekah*, in which one would have given thanks to God before eating. For example, before eating bread, one would pray: *'Baruch attah Adonai*

Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz, 'Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. They are similar to the prayers at the minor elevations as our Eucharistic table is set. So in giving thanks, Jesus was simply following Jewish tradition, and we continue that tradition at the Eucharistic table. But, the Eucharist has another significant meaning as well. It is the sacrifice. Christ will offer himself as a sacrifice to God in the same way that lambs were offered as a sacrifice to God in the Temple. Every year at the Festival of the Passover (Pesach), lambs were sacrificed as a commemoration of the angel that passed over the Hebrew people in Egypt, because they followed God's commandment and slew a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorposts. That is known as the lamb of the Pesach (or Pascal lamb). Jesus in his sacrifice on the Cross became the ultimate Paschal lamb.

Our celebration of Maundy Thursday shows us that Jesus's story is our story, and our story is Jesus's story. Jesus challenges us to do something different and to be someone different. As Christians, we are supposed to show the world that there is a better way to live, a way of love, humility, and caring for each other and our communities. The events that we witness tonight help draw us into the journey that leads from the gates of Jerusalem to Golgotha. All of this helps us to remind us that we have been given a charge to love one another and to take care of one another. It's not enough for us to give lip service to that mandate, we have to live it.

Tonight's service is just the beginning of the story. Tonight we will all leave in silence, without an actual dismissal. We have to come back tomorrow to experience Part 2 of the story. But if you stick it out, you'll really have something to celebrate, come Easter. Amen.

Resources

Texts of Blessings before eating, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/90551/jewish/Texts-of-Blessings-Before-Eating.htm

Passover Sacrifice, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11934-passover-sacrifice>

Mitchell, Leonel L., *Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and the Great Fifty Days: A Ceremonial Guide*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007)

Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the entrance into Jerusalem to the resurrection*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011)