

“The Mandate”

Salado UMC—29 March 2018
Maundy Thursday
Preaching Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35—Year B
Salado, Texas 76571

“Commandment Number One of any truly civilized society is this:

Let people be different”—(David Grayson).

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Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. [2] The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper [3] Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, [4] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

[5] Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. [6] He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" [7] Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." [8] Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." [9] Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" [10] Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." [11] For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

[12] After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? [13] You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. [14] So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [15] For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. [16] Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. [17] If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

[31] "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. [32] If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. [33] Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' [34] I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. [35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:1-17, 31b-35).

John' Gospel offers us an example of how Jesus communicated with his disciples. "And during supper Jesus . . . got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel." After

some table talk with Peter, Jesus explains to the disciples exactly what he is doing. Jesus teaches them: “I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.”

John offers its typical and varied message: perplexing, challenging, and amazing—all at the same time. Ask Christians which is their “favorite” Gospel, and many will say, “John.” To which we can then ask: “Have you read John lately?” Clearly, it contains “God so loved the world,” etc. But when read completely, John can test us.

In the Fourth Gospel, no one baptizes Jesus, Jesus begins no Eucharistic tradition, and Jesus controls each moment, waiting until his hour has come. John substitutes a “Farewell Discourse” for Jesus’ agonizing Gethsemane prayer, then Jesus marches forth to oppose those who would betray and arrest him. At every moment in his trial, torture, and execution, Jesus remains surprisingly in command.

Only in John do we have the scene we read on this holy night of Maundy Thursday. In the other Gospels Jesus serves—feeds, heals, and exorcises. In John Jesus strips, kneels, and washes—not himself but his followers—and tells them to do the same for each other. Here Jesus performs the Christological hymn we love in Philippians 2:5 ff., taking the form of a servant. Jeremy Taylor wrote 162 years ago:

And he chose to wash their feet rather than their head, that he might have the opportunity of a more humble posture, and a more apt signification of his charity. Thus God lays everything aside, that he may serve his servants; heaven stoops to earth, and one abyss calls upon another, and the miseries of [humanity], which were next to infinite, are excelled by a mercy equal to the immensity of God (*The Whole Works of Jeremy Taylor*, London, 1856).

Foot washing was a necessary custom in Jesus’ time. Hosts would either provide water in a basin or have a slave/servant wash guest’s feet. It was a gesture of hospitality, and after traveler’s journey on hot dusty roads, foot washing was hygienic. Washing a guest’s feet was something that a host NEVER did—never! So, when Jesus began to wash the disciples’ feet we see why the disciples squirmed and Peter argued. What Jesus did, hosts simply did not do. But Jesus was making a point by being an example. In fact, Jesus’ point is so crucial that in John’s Gospel this foot washing story replaces communion/Lord’s Supper familiar from the Synoptic Gospels. It reveals what John thought about Jesus’ ministry and life!

Us church folks often get confused about the nature of the church. After Pentecost, when the church added 3000 in a day, Luke offers us a perspective on what the early church believed its mission as Jesus’ disciples. Luke extends a “job description” for Christians: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Please note that, according to Luke, there are four chief church functions: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. There are many things not on the list. Rather, we see, teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. The church does this. Our “job description” is serving—it is our purpose to remember tonight.

Maundy Thursday is the day/night we consider Jesus and his final evening with his disciples before his betrayal, denial, and crucifixion. People wonder why we call this day “Maundy Thursday.” “Maundy” comes from a Latin word, *mandatum*, from which we get “mandate” or “command.” John’s Gospel account of the foot washing reminds us that Jesus gave a command. Just as Jesus had washed their feet, so the disciples should now also wash others. “So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (13:14-15). Jesus also says:

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 (John 13:34-35).

Maundy Thursday prompts us to recall that Jesus “mandated” us to “love one another.” As Jesus humbled himself and washed the disciples’ feet, we too offer ourselves in humble service to one another. And . . . that is why Jesus washes our feet.

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