

# A Table to Remember

Sermon by Patricia A. Geiseman  
Maundy Thursday  
March 29, 2018  
John 13 and 1 Corinthians 11

It is popular nowadays to have lots of photos and even videos at the visitation for a person who has died. Usually a couple of persons take responsibility for gathering pictures of a loved ones' life from the early years and beyond.

It seems I have been watching a lot of these lately. One thing I have noticed is that many of the photos are from family celebrations, such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and weddings. Other photos are taken at holiday times, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, the Fourth of July. Oftentimes families are gathered around a table with food: dining room tables, banquet tables, and picnic tables.

Most of us remember familiar food from our families. Even though I look up most recipes online now, I have saved old recipes, from my mother and grandmothers, and even my own. Even just reading the favorites brings back memories: pumpkin bars ... red cabbage ... cranberry scones. My time for learning how to make my grandmother Geiseman's peanut brittle is about up. One of our members told me years ago that reading a recipe card in mother's handwriting brought back so many memories.

So, we gather weekly around a table to remember the past, celebrate the present, and hope for the future.

We gather around a table that calls us together with a time-tested recipe of mutual love.

Tonight's worship is the first of three parts, part one of the great *Triduum*, the Great three days. On this night long, long ago, Jesus gathered with his closest friends to celebrate the Passover.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus shares his Last Supper with words we remember: "This bread is my body ... this wine is my blood ... given for you ... remember me."

John's Eucharistic scenes take place elsewhere, on green grass where multitudes are gathered and Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and shares bread enough for everyone! Here in John, on this holy night, we have instead of the Eucharist, foot washing ... and a commandment, *mandatum*: See what I am doing for you! "Love one another."

Foot washing has never been a popular liturgical action in Lutheran tradition. I remember a grade-school event at my Missouri Synod Lutheran School. The exact

context escapes me, but we were in the gym, seated in small circles in folding chairs. We were each supposed to take off our shoes and socks for a foot-washing ceremony. My dad, who was a cooperative and churching guy, quietly left his shoes on. It didn't surprise me. He never took his shoes off unless he was going to bed!

Footwashing is culturally foreign and practically unnecessary. But in Jesus' time, according to ancient writings, not even a Hebrew slave was expected to perform such a menial task!

So John's story tells us how low Jesus was stooping!

There's a framed print of Leonardo De Vinci's "The Last Supper" in the sacristy here. It was in my grandmother's dining room for decades, and my parents gave it to her as a gift from Italy almost fifty years ago.

On Holy Thursday we join another family picture, from long ago. We join the disciples at the Passover table for an act of loving service. We join them all: Judas the betrayer and Peter the denier and the Beloved Disciple.

On this night we remember, and we confess our own struggles. We trust in a God who is larger and stronger.

We welcome all to the table, those who have betrayed friends, denied loved ones, and cursed at the truth. We claim our belovedness.

As another writer said, "Liturgy carries the soul's freight on rails laid long before Holy Week." [*Feasting on the Word*] We trust in the Sacred River carried by the church's currents.

We're commanded to love as Christ loves, which means we make choices of loving behaviors. Christ-like actions can be chosen in the strength of the towel-girded Christ. We remember a meal and a command, a recipe for relationship. On this holy night it is good for us to remember our purpose and how it connects to the stooping Jesus.

Our Purpose is to share Christ's Abundant Love with each other and the world. To consider again how we live out these values as we follow faithfully, give unselfishly, care for each other, serve compassionately, are welcoming and accepting, engage others to enhance wellbeing.

We read John's farewell scene of the final Passover, and we remember again not only what Jesus, said but what he did. He asked his friends, "Do you know what I have done for you?"

Oftentimes, though not always, children realize later in life the sacrifices parents made out of love for them. Hours of work, worry, getting up in the middle of the night, early morning, staying awake and waiting ... selfless love.

So much of our love for each other is expressed by humble service.

Jesus' action, here and throughout his ministry, forms the character of our community and shapes our virtues.

In many ways this is a remarkable counter-cultural moral vision, far away from the self-interestedness, economic ideology, and blustery quests for power, advantage, and domination so well-known from the realm of politics and in the headlines.

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I read that, today, Pope Francis has washed the feet of twelve inmates in Rome's central prison, Regina Coeli. This includes even those in the special protected wing, the most despised predatory criminals. He is the fourth pope to do this. Five years ago, Pope Francis raised eyebrows among conservatives when he washed the feet of young men and women—including Muslims in a youth detention center.

Tonight we are adapting this ancient tradition of footwashing, one that comes so easy to the faithful Brethrens.

This past winter, many of us washed our hands more than ever before! Ah! The flu germs. We didn't want to get sick, or share germs either. I tried to be mindful of others and to remember that even if I wasn't sick, I could pass on someone else's sick germs. Germs are invisible and dangerous.

In the olden days we didn't have hand sanitizer. Some of us will remember that our mothers would say, "Wash your hands! It's time to eat!"

So tonight we will have our hands washed and blessed for service of love and goodness in the world. It is a time to remember the lessons from Jesus, the loving servant leader.

1. **Jesus, our Rabbi and Lord, teaches us humility.** We prefer to remain in control, and we can sometimes be too proud to admit what we really need. We can be like Peter and resist showing any vulnerability.

*Jesus stoops down beside us and invites us to receive his love.*

2. **Jesus, the Servant leader, teaches about hospitality.** The host of the meal is not the most important person present; the guests are!

When people share stories of family traditions and dinners, someone hosted! Someone made sure that there was enough room and enough food for everyone.

On this night we remember that God is the Great Householder, Abba, Father, the One who desires that everyone has enough.

Pastors don't wear towels around their waists, but the stole is a symbol of service, sometimes called an "*orarium*," linked to the cloth used by Jesus to wash disciples' dirty feet. The stole is a symbol of the yoke of service.

*A welcoming Jesus invites us to make room at the table.*

3. **Another lesson in the ancient story is one of hope.** In 2006 a former official of the South African government washed the feet of activists as a public apology and a gesture of hope for the restoration of relationships. We give careful thought to who needs reconciliation. Including ourselves! [M. L. Bringle, *Feasting on the Word*]

*A loving Jesus invites us to be reconciled.*

The words of scripture from John's Gospel are written on our hearts: "Love one another as I have loved you."

From Paul's letter: "This is my body ... for you ... this cup is the new covenant ... do this in remembrance of me."

Words written, and we remember, so that when our hearts break open, the holy words will fall inside!

So we gather tonight around a table, with humble hands washed, for receiving. We make room for each other like the Great Host, with hearts open for hope.

Together, we trust the Sacred River carried by the church's current.

And claim the gift of Belovedness.

Amen.

**Resources:**

[workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)

*Feasting on the Word: Lent through Eastertide*

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