

Maundy Thursday
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
April 14, 2022

On Maundy Thursday, we focus on two things, in particular, that Jesus did with his disciples on the night before he was crucified. First, the institution of Holy Communion, and second, the footwashing. For me, the most profound thing about both is their *physicality*. The last two things that Jesus gives his followers before he dies—the supreme teaching and the supreme gift—both involve our bodies. They aren't just teachings—they are physical acts that he tells us to *do*, to participate in, for the rest of our lives. The love of Jesus Christ is to become incarnate. Embodied in you and me.

“Take this,” he says. “This is my body and blood. Eat it and drink it. Become it. Do this continually in remembrance of me. Let this shape who you are, and actually be part of your body and what you do with your body. Also...love each other as I have loved you. And just in case you've been watching too much TV, and you don't know what love is, here's the definition of love. I'll show you.” He gets down on his hands and knees and washes the disciples' feet. Remember, just before this, the disciples had been arguing like little kids about which of them was the greatest...fighting over who was the top model in the beauty pageant. And now, just a few minutes later, Jesus is bowing down to them.

He physically subjects himself to the stink and dirt of those disciples, who cannot hold a candle to his greatness. Jesus tells Peter, “you're right—you're the student and I am the master. But this is what the true master does.” He bows to them and gets his hands dirty with their dirt. He tells them “this is what it means to love. This is what it means to be human. This is what it means to be truly masterful, and to show true greatness. And I want *you* to do this. I want you to act towards each other, as I've just acted towards you. Serve each other, fully aware that you are under no obligation to do so, and that you will never, ever be paid for it. In short, be like me. Love each other as I have loved you!

Jesus knows he can't just say the word “love.” He has to *do* love for them, physically. Notice how the gospel spells it out: He *gets up* from his place. He leaves his proper place at the head of the table. He bows down. He touches those dirty feet. Love shows itself in those particular, humble acts. Forget feelings. Those are a wonderful bonus. Yes, it's vitally important to tell your spouse you love him or her, but it's just as important to show them you love them. And how do you show them? Clean the garage. Small deeds speak the loudest. Like the hymn says, “love consecrates the humblest act.” It's simple, it's real, it's sacrificial, and you won't get paid for it. Christian love puts the other person first, because that's what our almighty creator God has always done.

I'm sure some of you have been to a footwashing service at church. You know how intensely personal and uncomfortable that can be. It's humbling to wash someone's feet, but personally I'm a lot more uncomfortable when someone's washing mine. That service always helps me think of what God is doing for me in baptism. Christ washing us with his own sacrifice, his own death. And now we show it through our physical actions.

Truly, the only way you can love other people with the love of Jesus—the love we're talking about tonight—is if you know you've been *way* overpaid.

I love what Tim Imbrock—the missionary pilot who was with us a few weeks back—said in his presentation during Sunday school. Basically that when we stop loving with Christ's love in our everyday relationships and actions (in other words when we spiritualize our love for Jesus, separate it from actually serving each other), then our *verbal witness* about Jesus becomes basically a lie. People hear the words, but they don't see the Word embodied in us. We can make God's expensive love into a nice idea. A friendly disposition. A good attitude towards people in general. When that happens, the gospel is no longer working through people, it's no longer changing lives, it's only making people feel good with where they're sitting, in their own space. Faith becomes passive, and individualized. And then you know what happens...people start feeling no need to be part of the body anymore. It's no longer a religion of costly eternal love, it's a religion of temporary comfort. And you can get that binging on Netflix. And that's very sad, when people start missing Jesus who is right here, in the bread and the cup, and in the people who eat that bread and become the body of Jesus to each other.

The disciples anxiously arguing about small stuff the night before Jesus dies on the cross is a sad picture of us. And then we see Jesus: he knows exactly who he is and how the story is going to end. And he bows down with complete confidence, with no thought of keeping anything to himself...and he washes those disciples' feet like a lowly servant. And just like he told his disciples that night, he tells you and me now: "because of what I'm doing for you, you can stop worrying about yourselves, and you can do this for each other, too. You can do this every day of your life, even right up until the night before you die. You can know who God is, you can know who you are, and you can know how the story is going to end." Now, that is a person who will never be ruled by death. That's a free person. Jesus is facing death, but he knows there's something more than just a cross for him out there. So he pours himself out all the way. And because of him, you and I can know there's something much more than a cross for us out there. So here we are.

This is the new identity that Jesus stamped on us on Maundy Thursday—it is our baptismal identity. This is how the world will come to know who Jesus is: When we love each other with a passion, with a loyalty, with a commitment, with a single-mindedness that is costly. It's not words—it's expensive actions.

Praise be to God, we can actually *be* the people God wants us to be. This is not beyond us. To pay ourselves out without expecting anything in return sounds impossible... and it *is* definitely impossible for a person who thinks he's owed something. What makes us different as Christians is that when we come up against that terrible emptiness in ourselves which is real, when we come to that cross which is real, when we come to that cold place where we've run out of love for our fellow human beings, run out of resources, run out of patience for each other...when we come to experience the death of ourselves, which is real...we see the One who has gone into that emptiness completely, who continually returns to us with endless love, abundant resources, and renewing

forgiveness. When you know you are being way overpaid, everything Jesus says tonight about loving, and serving, becomes real. Beautifully real.