

Thirteen men having dinner to celebrate their shared history. One of them washes the others' feet. Then after dinner he predicts the future and offers inspirational speeches. Sounds like a wacky cult group or something coming out of Roswell, New Mexico, minus the Kool Aid or Aliens of course.

On Maundy Thursday, we are transported to the Upper Room where we remember the last meal the disciples shared with the pre-resurrected Christ. We focus on three major movements of that evening which shape our services and our Lenten journey: • The washing of the disciples' feet, which these days we may relate to all of the intentional hand washing and sanitizing we have been doing throughout the pandemic. • The institution of the Eucharist/or Holy Communion, and the incarnational commissioning of the disciples: "You also should love one another."

Now this third element is the *mandatum novum* — new commandment — from which Maundy Thursday derives its name. Perhaps, instead of Throwback Thursday's, which from time to time is lifted up on people's Facebook posts, we could say today is new commandment Thursday. And although there is a rich theology that undergirds Maundy Thursday, it's often the stepchild of the Lenten season. Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday — and yet if churches, or congregants, were to celebrate only three of these four, which might we skip? Many Protestant church traditions don't observe all these holy days, and might not even refer to them as "holy days." One pastor in what some might call a "low church tradition" recently asked, "There's church on Thursday? That's a long work week."

High-Church, or low-church, or flip flops, or blazers, all of us want to remember and engage Christ with a fresh perspective. Let's start with a known territory, the classic Maundy Thursday story that takes place in the upper room in John 13, our Gospel lesson for today. There are two layers to this onion or story —

the passage *is* about foot washing, while at the same time it *is not* about foot washing. Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel that was wrapped around his waist."

Are you kidding? Imagine any world leader doing something like this today. What would you think of a President, or of a King or Queen, removing the patent leather shoes and moist dress socks of their constituents, or subjects, and washing the lint and jam from between their toes. Or, picture them washing the feet of individuals who have opposed their policies, or who have publicly attacked their beliefs and/or their character and morality. Or visualize for a moment them tugging the toes of world leaders like Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Il, or Hassan Rouhani.

The *humility* of Christ is what stuns us. The King of Kings chose the servant's role as an object lesson. Remember that in those days, foot washing was no more a symbolic ceremony, than was breaking bread or pouring the wine. It was practical. Dusty, muddy and manure-strewn roads made sandaled feet a mealtime buzzkill. The first-century household slave would almost always get the foot-washing task, as it was one of the most demeaning and filthy tasks in their culture.

Since the meeting in our story tonight was held in secret, there was no slave to do the work. To further the irony of the Messiah washing feet, Luke tells us that the Upper Room discourse included the favorite spat of the apostles, "Which of us is the greatest?" Chest thumping, and pats on the back, interrupted by foot washing!

The cultural, the conversational, and the Christological comparison of this service event inspires us. In fact, if we were able to be together this evening, and if we were to try to wash one another's feet, the idea would be to experience and depict the power of the humility and servitude Jesus demonstrated. We might also learn the importance of distancing ourselves from comfort, normalcy, and the status quo for the sake of our community. But the repetition of this Christ-act does

not need to be foot washing. That was an ideal first-century example, but what do you think would be its 21st-century equivalent? What characteristics of Christ most stand out to you, based on his washing of the disciples' feet? What is the foot washing equivalent in our culture which would communicate these qualities? Jesus washed their feet, and they were to do as he had done.

As I was preparing for Holy Week, I thought it might be cool for members of First Lutheran to try washing each other's hands, and to also share pictures and videos with me for tonight's worship service. Unfortunately, that idea kind of fell flat, no one took me up on it. But...perhaps one of the things we can do to serve one another, and to love one another, is to regularly lift up people we know, and even those we don't know, in prayer. If a friend shares with you that they are struggling with a health concern, if a stranger admits to you that they recently became homeless and are trying to turn things around, if a relative confides in you that they are currently experiencing difficulties in their marriage, if a neighbor informs you that they recently lost their job and have been struggling to find work, maybe we can consistently and intentionally lend them a caring and listening ear... while also remembering to give their worries and concerns over to God on their behalf?

On a deeper level, John 13 doesn't have much to do with foot washing at all. It was really just an easily understood cultural metaphor, and a readily accessible visual demonstration for Jesus to use. He could've easily chosen to clean up sheep dung if he had been in a stable, and not in a room celebrating a last meal with his followers. The whole passage, in fact, is about incarnating into a world of pain and brokenness on behalf of those in need. And Jesus was commissioning the disciples to do this based on his command to imitate him.

In case you didn't know, John frequently tells us a story underneath a story, and here he does it again. If you don't believe me, then I invite you to look at the

many extra, and otherwise unnecessary details in tonight's story; that point to a downward mobility, a theology of leveling, or an incarnation into brokenness. "Jesus knew that his hour had come." If given only three more days to live, what would you do? Who would you talk with? What would you say? If you only had three days to create your entire life legacy, what would try to accomplish?

"He loved them to the end." When we hear this phrase, what event in the life of Christ do we think of? The cross? But the cross is still five chapters away, and John is painting this event of foot washing, or this act of service, as loving them to the end. There must be something more than dirty feet here to warrant this statement. So let's keep reading.

"Jesus, *knew* that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.." Did John interview Jesus to *know* what he was thinking here? Or is he telling a larger story over the small minute details of the foot washing? Come from God, and returning to God — this is the key to setting up the "movement" Jesus makes throughout the symbolism of tonight's scripture passage.

The details in verses four through five are utterly unnecessary if not symbolic:• He "got up from the table." The Jewish view of heaven includes the eschatological image of the banquet table. Jesus gets up from it and leaves it.• He "tied a towel around himself." Jesus takes on the dress of a servant. Think about the visual imagery we typically see representing the crucifixion — Jesus always has a simple garment around his hips.• He wipes their feet with "the towel that was tied around him." Jesus brings his own humanity to bear upon the filth of the world he encounters.• Then in verse 12, he puts on his robe and returns to the table.

This kind of detail is either stunning, or superfluous. John is capturing history with an extra literary sophistication that we know of his gospel, drawing the reader into the deeper details. This foot washing has little to do with dirty feet,

and everything to do with the life of Christ. Leaving heaven, stripping himself of glory and divine rights, taking on human flesh, and entering into our suffering and pain— applying his very humanity to the redemption of the dirty humanity of others.

At the heart of Maundy Thursday, John 13, and the act of service that takes place, is a meal between Jesus and his disciples! This was their last meal together, and as Jesus was a God-fearing Jew, he was leading the disciples through a Passover dinner celebration. And yet, I believe that he was also helping them, and us, connect with the idea that this special last meal was also to be seen as a new kind of Passover.

Just as Moses and the Israelites continued to celebrate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, we receive bread and the wine this evening and every Sunday morning during worship, and are reminded that through Christ's sacrificial death, and his blood being spilt for us on the cross, we have been delivered from sin and death! And in response to our Lord's great sacrifice let us try our best to follow the last and final commandment he gave to his followers before his crucifixion. On this Maundy Thursday, and every day that follows, let us love God and one another, as Christ has loved us through compassionate conversations and sacrificial service! Amen.