

Maundy Thursday

18 April, Anno Domini 2019

St. John 13:1-15, 34-35

Pr. Kurt Ulmer (adapted from Pr. Hemmer's "A God Who Loves")

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Children know the song "He's got the whole world in His hands." Every power is at His disposal. Every authority under heaven and earth is His. He has created everything. And He holds everything in His eternal hands. And now, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him."

Jesus holds the whole world in His hands. And what will He do with those hands? He will remove the clothes with which He, the eternal God, is garbed. He will lay them aside, take up a bowl of water, and use His divine hands to remove the sandals from the scummy, dirty, travel-worn feet of His disciples. He will hold those feet in His holy hands and wash them. Jesus has the whole world in His hands. And He knows that the Father has given all things into His hands. That's why He takes into His hands the dirty feet of the men who have walked with Him day after day.

God has hands. This is not metaphorical language. In the person of Jesus, God joined to human flesh, God has hands. And feet. And eyes, ears, fingers, lungs, nostrils, teeth, legs, fingernails, and cuticles. And with these, He kneels down to take up the feet of sinful men into His hands.

You can understand Peter's shock and protest. "You shall never wash my feet!" What is God doing washing feet? This is unbecoming of a proper deity. Gods should keep a safe distance from their creations. There should be limited interaction between Creator and creature, especially if their creatures have rebelled and set themselves against the goodness and graciousness of the god. Gods do not become men. They do not unite themselves with sinful humans. And they certainly don't have human flesh—and hands—and should certainly not use those hands to take up and wash the grime away from between the toes of the sweaty, sandal-shod feet of those men who purport to follow such an incarnate God. And, in fact, you do protest every time you balk at God's mercy that He would serve you, that He would humble Himself. "No, no, Lord. I will serve You. I have so much that I need to do you for you. Just wait. You'll see. It will be great."

But then Jesus' words, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me," frustrate the pious pretensions of the little Peter in all of us. He relents, but he must have known viscerally that this was all wrong. Washing feet is not what the Christ should do, not what a god should do. This is

slave labor, a servant's task. If God descends to take human flesh and then stoops to the lowest position, the foot-washing place, the whole economy of human hierarchy is turned upside down.

As if that weren't enough, Jesus then asks, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" (And the answer is, of course, "Absolutely not! This makes no sense!") "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." And, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

As if Christianity weren't hard enough to buy in to. Now, "Do as I have done to you." And "as I have done" is taking the lowest, most servile position of the foot-washing servant. Love one another like that? So Christianity isn't about making me better? It isn't about elevating myself? I have to become nothing? I'm supposed to despise any and all glory for myself? It's not all about me?

This is painful. You'll abide with the command to love others...to a point. "Love one another any way you wish" is the creed of American popular religion. Whatever love means to you. But, "Love AS I HAVE LOVED YOU"? With a foot-washing, self-deprecating kind of love? No thanks. How are people going to notice me? How can I spend time making myself better if my life is supposed to be spent all in the service of others?

You know what it means to love others as you wish to be loved. But to love as Jesus loves you? To love selflessly and sacrificially? That's a tall order. But Jesus gives this new commandment, this *mandatum novum*—the reason we call today "Maundy Thursday"—on the night when He is betrayed, given into the hands of sinful men. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you." Simple. Do this, Jesus bids. Love like this. Like I do. Love those who absolutely do not deserve it, those who will never be able to return the favor, those who hate you, who reject you, who betray you, who are inclined toward your destruction. Wash their feet. Assume the posture of a servant. Or worse, absolve their sins. Give them forgiveness for sins; forgiveness they could never deserve. Don't hold any of their hatred or cruelty against them. Love like that. Okay? "By this all people will know that you are My disciples," if you have love for one another like this.

This new commandment He gives you: love like this. Love incarnationally. Love as flesh among flesh. Love as sinners among sinners. Love those who cannot and will not ever deserve your love. Love to forgive those who are completely unforgiveable. Love with your hands. Love in order to remove the filth, the guilt, the shame of your brothers and sisters. Love in order to get the dirt of your fellow man onto your own hands so that he might be clean. Love because your love will never be repaid. Love sacrificially. Love and never expect anything in return. Love as I have loved you, Jesus commands. Love at the cost of everything - your time, your money, your energy, your happiness, your convenience, your good name, even your life.

Okay, then. Who does that? No one. And yet, "As I have loved you," is pretty absolute. Jesus loves perfectly and doesn't wait for your love toward others to show His love for you. He loves.

If foot washing were the extent of Jesus' love, that would be difficult enough to emulate. But He doesn't have hands just to take up His disciples' grimy feet. He doesn't have fingers merely as instruments to scrub between their toes. He has the whole world in His hands. And He intends those hands to be nailed to the cross. This is His love.

Behold the man who loves those who are completely unlovable. Behold the man who loves those who, in just a few minutes, will abandon Him, will flee to save their own lives. Behold the man who loves the unlovable, the rebellious, the sinful. Behold the man who loves those who could never deserve it. Behold the man who is God and who, in order to love His creatures perfectly and completely, has become man. Behold the man who loves the world completely and perfectly in His death on the cross.

If you want to love like this, like Jesus did, like He commands His disciples to love, you will never get there relying on your own deficient, selfish love. If you want to love like this, first, you've got to be loved like this. "As I have loved you" is here, on the altar. The fruits of Jesus' sacrificial love are in His Holy Supper for you to eat and to drink. Behold the man who gave Himself in the perfect act of love. Behold the man who on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to His disciples as His own body. Behold the man who poured His blood into the loveless mouths of His disciples to forgive their sins. Behold the man, veiled in bread and wine, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins, for life and salvation.

This feast of love fulfills Jesus' command to love one another. Here, as you are fed and nourished with the body and blood of the only One ever to love like this, you are strengthened, as the liturgy says, "in fervent love toward one another." Disciples who feed together on the same loving Lord are united together in His love. "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Looking upon one another, we see veiled under the flaws, behind the tough exteriors, brother and sister sinners who have been loved and washed by the Lord Jesus Christ and clothed with the same mercy and righteousness.

This is why if there is any enmity between two Christians, any division, we must work fervently to dissolve it. In the Lord's Supper Christ unites Himself to us and us to Him such that there is no division. He harbors no anger toward us and holds no grudges for our many sins. Instead, He gladly takes our sins as His own. We must, in the same way, set aside all wrath and dissension in order to be united to one another by and in the love of Christ. It doesn't matter who was right or wrong. What matters is that in Christ, we are both forgiven. To Satan's great pleasure, division only wreaks havoc on the body of Christ and consumes God's children from the inside.

If the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High God, who holds in His hands all of creation, stoops down to make Himself lower than us and serve us, what hypocrisy and blasphemy if we seek greatness and praise for ourselves. We are worthy of no glory whatsoever. In a great paradox, true Christian greatness is found in seeking none, in pouring out your life simply so that others may benefit, without so much as a passing consideration of what you will get out of it. This is how you are called to love and this is exactly how God, in Christ, has loved you.

In order to love like Jesus, behold the man. On His altar, on the paten, in the chalice, behold the man to offer Himself to you. In the Supper, behold the man who loves you enough to stoop down in humility to serve you and to forgive you freely, fully, week after week.

In the Name of +Jesus.