

Maundy Thursday
1 April, Anno Domini 2021
St. John 13:1-15
Pastor Kurt Ulmer

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

Loving sinners is a dirty business. Our hearts are stained black with our selfish ambitions and delusions of grandeur. We are caked with anger and covetousness. We are soaked through with bitterness and resentment. We gossip. We brag. We tear down. We argue over petty things. Worse yet, even though we're covered with filth, drowning in it, we love it. We can't get enough of it. We're addicted to it. We stubbornly maintain that there's nothing wrong. We try to hide and protect our sins. Things aren't really that bad. We don't need help. We can take care of things just fine on our own. "No, Jesus, You don't need to wash my feet. I've kept them clean enough on my own."

Loving sinners means that you have to get dirty, you have to get yourself covered in their mess, a mess that they made themselves. And you certainly can't care for sinners without involving yourself in their messy, hurting, broken lives. It means not simply wiping off the surface but digging down deep through the layers of muck. Loving sinners means seeing the ugliest side of them and instead of turning away in disgust, getting down and taking their sin as your own. Their burdens, their troubles, their messes are your own. You suffer their losses and sorrows with them. You mourn with them. There can be no ego. You can't keep a safe distance. You can't look down on them from your lofty throne of moral superiority. You can't gloat over their weakness and brokenness. To love those who hate you and betray you, to love those who love and care only for themselves, those who will flee from you and even deny you in your hour of greatest need, you must completely empty yourself and care for nothing other than them. You must lay aside your own glory, your own reputation, even your own cleanness and take their wretchedness as your own. Love will always cost you.

This is the example our Lord Jesus has given us. This is love, a love that can't leave sinners in their sin. Maundy Thursday wasn't about feet or just doing nice things. Jesus doesn't just do "nice" things. He rescues from

death. He washes away sin. He gives eternal life and salvation. Ponder for moment. There was nothing more pressing for Jesus, nothing more important for Him in those last few hours before His passion than having mercy on sinners - on Judas, even though he had already sold his soul for thirty peaces of silver; on Peter, even though he would call down curses on himself rather than admit that he was one of Jesus' disciples. These, too, were washed, bathed in Christ's forgiveness because Christ Jesus came to save sinners. And not just the garden-variety ones, but the worst, the dirtiest He could find - real sinners, like Judas, Peter, Paul, me, and you.

The fact that, like Peter, we find such love shocking is a testament to the fact that we really don't understand what it is to love. We are good at loving those who love us and serve our purposes. We are good at loving those who are easy to love and don't bother us, don't get on our nerves, do everything the way we want it done, and don't need our help and our mercy. But that isn't really love. That's self-gratification. Love rejoices in the blessings given to your enemy. Love rejoices in your promotion that was given to the boss's favorite. Any hesitation to the contrary, any attempt to justify your hatred and your unwillingness only betrays your lack of love - true, godly love.

Jesus was fully aware of what would happen in the next few hours. He knew that the very same hands that were now covered in the dirt of His disciples' feet would soon be pierced and covered in His own Blood. He knew that the very men He now served would serve themselves and abandon Him, one even handing Him over to those who hated Him. But He didn't hesitate. He loved them to the end and served them.

What wondrous love this is! And why? They didn't deserve it. We certainly don't deserve it. Like the disciples we have been cleaned. We have been bathed in the waters of Holy Baptism. And yet how often do we return to our sin? How often do we go and cover the brilliant robe of Christ's righteousness in the filth and stench of loveless words and deeds? And yet, our Lord remains, knelt down, prepared to wash you again. He wants to forgive you. Why else would He continue to cause His Word of forgiveness to be proclaimed unless He wanted you to hear it? Why else has He gathered together this flock if not to tend to your wounds and comfort your terrified conscience? Why else has Jesus placed a called and ordained servant in your midst if not so that you might hear the voice of your Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you? Why else has He

prepared the feast of His Body and Blood this night if not to seal to you again the the promise that all that is His belongs now to you?

This is Maundy Thursday. In Latin it is Mandatum - mandate. Christ commands His Christians to love one another, to serve one another as He has loved us. He even gave us an example. He, the Lord and Teacher, the highest at any table, humbled Himself to the lowest place. He became a servant. He washed feet. He used His life, His power, and His authority to serve us. With this humility and selflessness we are to love one another. Nothing less. Be merciful and forgiving, patient and self-sacrificing. Bear burdens. Pray. Speak the truth and share the Gospel.

But there is another command that our Lord gave this night. This command was rooted in the fact that we will fail, we do fail, at the command to love. It was not a command for your works. It was and remains a command - a mandate - that Christians receive the Lord's Body and Blood in the Holy Communion for the forgiveness of sins. This command is for your benefit, in the same vein as you commanding your children to eat their vegetables, only far more important. This command is for your eternal salvation. The Lord's Supper was not an example like the foot washing. There is no object lesson in Holy Communion that we are to emulate. There is real Body and blood, real forgiveness, real life, real proclamation of the sacrificial death of Christ for the sin of the world. Like the command to love, the command to receive the bread of Christ's Body and the cup of His Blood is not an option or suggestion. It is not an exercise in Christian freedom to forego Holy Communion when it is offered. Unless you are prevented by uncontrollable circumstances - imprisonment or illness - it is an act of unbelief to turn down the invitation to receive Christ's Supper.

It is a sacrifice. It requires you to not do other things. It requires choices. But it shouldn't be a hard choice. Truly, the sacrifice would be to have to go without the Sacrament, not give up something in order to receive it. Cut your vacation short, miss your kid's game or practice, tell work that you need the time off, bring your kids to church when they're cranky and tell you they don't want to come and then be thankful that you can. You need to receive this life-giving gift of your Savior. It is life. It is peace. It is comfort for your sin-wearied soul. If it is not possible for you to come and receive it, then insist that it be brought to you. And if that isn't safe, then ask your brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for you that your faith may not suffer as a result. But do not cast aside this gift for convenience. Your

Lord wouldn't command it if it wasn't necessary for you. To despise anything Christ gives is dangerous. He offered His Body and Blood to the death of God's judgment so that you could have this food as the medicine of immortality, food that is a blessing to both your body and your soul.

The Christian who doesn't have the Lord's Supper lacks. That Christian may live. Faith may endure the darkness and sorrow and tribulation of this life of sin. St. Paul writes "That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." (1 Cor. 11:30) Do we dare tempt God and the devil at the same time - God to take it away and the devil to destroy our faith? Without the Lord's Supper we are not what we are meant to be. The Lord's Supper is essential to faith because Christ has given it to and for faith. Faith hungers for the Sacrament of the Altar because it is the Gospel - the forgiveness of sins. It is Christ Himself with all His blessings. Faith hungers for the Sacrament precisely of the Word which Christ our Lord has spoken and the promise He has attached to this food.

This past year should have been a wake up call to God's children. We still had the Supper by God's mercy. But it was more difficult to receive. One family in the narthex at a time. Sterilizing all the communion vessels between every household. For some of our brothers and sisters in the faith, even this would have been a small price to pay to receive this gift. Some live under the threat of imprisonment or even death if they are caught hearing the Word and receiving the Lord's Supper. We have been given a warning. These gifts can be taken away if we despise or treat them lightly. The Israelites were driven into exile and saw the temple reduced to dust for their idolatry and despising of God's Word and the sacrifices. They mourned and wept at what was lost - possibly forever. Would we? Let us never assume for a moment that the gifts of Christ can't be removed from us. Let us hear the invitation of Christ and run with fervent joy to receive His gifts, not asking if we have to, but how often may we. Because in this Sacrament we not only receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation we also perform the greatest act of love possible for our neighbor - we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. The cars in that parking lot stand as a testimony to the world that Christ is still gathering His children to feed and sustain them. You join the legions that lift up their voices in prayer against the devil and against those who would cause evil in this world.

The Holy Supper is how Christ has loved you. He has given you nothing less than Himself. He has laid down His life in order to fill the water, the bread, and the wine with forgiveness and salvation. He has instituted these precious treasures and commanded them to you so that you may have definite pledges and seals of your salvation against every accusation of the devil.

You have bathed. You have been cleansed and forgiven. But you have gotten your feet dirty. Evil roams throughout this world and through your heart. Repent and let Jesus wash you in His absolution and feed you the Holy Communion. You can't cleanse yourself. And the answer is not, as Peter found out, to deny Jesus this gracious work. Unless you let Jesus continue to cleanse you with His absolving Word, you will have no part with Jesus. Any who would claim that they no longer need forgiveness and will not receive this gracious work of God, separate themselves from Jesus who came for this very purpose - to love sinners to the very end, to love you all your days, to serve you by giving His life for you on the cross and to you in His Word and the blessed Sacraments.

Dear sinner, come, be loved by Jesus. Be cleansed of the crimson stains of your sin and have your part with Jesus, your Teacher and Lord who pardons your iniquities and feeds you with the very Bread of Heaven.

In the Name of +Jesus.