

Maundy Thursday, 2018

What would you do if you knew right now that tomorrow was the last day of your life?

From our Gospel this evening, we learn that Jesus “knew that his time had come to leave this world and go to this Father” (John 13:1). As a person of profound faith, Jesus knew his life’s ending was serving a deeper purpose—to draw all people back to God. So I believe he had a personal contentment about the ending of his life. But Jesus still wanted to make his last few hours on earth a valuable time for him and for those he loved, his closest followers.

So Jesus chose to do just a few things: he shared a meal, a last supper, more fully described in the other Gospels. And he taught a lesson about what really mattered to him and what he knew would be so important for his followers if they were to survive and thrive in the way that Jesus and God wanted them to do.

The best teachers realize that you cannot just talk to your students and expect them to learn. Words must have hands and heart and feet in order to come to life. If not, they are just words. So Jesus came up with a way to make his words memorable for his closest followers since they would not have his personal example for much longer.

In Luke’s version of this last night, there are some details that gave a further context to what Jesus did. Luke tells us that the disciples were debating who was the greatest among them. Jesus rebuked them saying that the kings of this world rule over their subjects. But it will be different with those who follow him. Jesus reminded them that “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ words are described as actions, too.

You see, apparently in the rush to have their meal, Jesus and his disciples had forgotten to follow some basic hygiene: washing their feet. They would have been reclining on the floor around a low table so their feet would be visible and perhaps even close to the face of the person next to them. In a land where people wore sandals and walked on dusty roads, this oversight would have been apparent and unpleasant. So Jesus decided to do something practical that was needed—and that would be memorable.

Jesus first took off his outer garments—the equivalent of a banker or a lawyer or a preacher taking off their suit. How we are dressed defines us, especially if we are in positions of respect and authority, like a rabbi. Jesus stood before them in the ancient equivalent of his undershorts and a t-shirt. Then he wrapped a long towel around his waist and poured some water in a basin and went to work. He did not make a big show of it—he just did something that needed to be done.

You may have heard before that this job was reserved for the youngest servant in a household because no one really wanted to do it. It would have been considered beneath an

adult servant. And here is this beloved and respected rabbi—whom some felt was the soon to be anointed as the new King David—doing a job that no one wanted to do.

As usual, Peter voiced what I imagine many of them felt—“No way, Lord! This will not do!” After some back and forth, Peter responded as he so often seemed to do—going over the top to the opposite position—“Lord, wash my hands and my feet, too!” Another person was there, too—Judas Iscariot. He does not depart until after Jesus’ washes all of his followers’ feet. The loving service that Jesus was teaching them to do by his example would even be given to those people that are not easy to love.

After enacting the lesson, Jesus reviewed it with his followers. Greatness is not a title. It is not what other people think about you. It is trusting in God and doing—doing—those needed things that are before you. This type of loving service reveals the reality of your faith in God and your awareness of the people around you. This type of loving service helps us participate more fully in life as we follow Jesus.

Because on this last night of Jesus’ life on earth, he wanted his disciples to get it. He wanted them to be able to face what he knew was coming for them—rejection, active resistance, even persecution and death. He knew that the suffering and death that he was about to go through in the next 24 hours would be part of their lives and their followers’ lives in the future. And they would need to know, really know, and be able to do what Jesus taught them.

Then Jesus gave words to what he had just done for them, what he wanted for them as he was about to go—“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so also must you love one another.” If they would love like Jesus, they would be able to endure. He said their love—our love—will be what really makes people notice we are “one of them,” one of his followers.

If we follow him this way, we will not need to hide from those who oppose us or even those who seek to harm us. Loving like Jesus will give us the strength we need to carry on. This type of love will help us give each other mutual support. This type of love will be our hope that one day even our fiercest enemies may love like Jesus, too.

This evening, we will do a sanitized reenactment of what Jesus did so long ago. Some priests I know get pedicures before Maundy Thursday. I get that. But in some ways, perhaps we should all wear sandals the week leading up to Maundy Thursday. Let our feet get good and dusty so that the washing we do is closer to what Jesus did. Regardless, the spirit of what we do is to remember again our Lord’s example. Whether we participate this evening and have our feet washed and wash someone else’s feet; or if we simply watch and pray; let us all look to Jesus to inspire and direct how we serve.

Because in this world, we have so many opportunities to do what is needed by paying attention to what is right in front of us. What is required of us is that we trust in God like Jesus did and that we are aware of what needs doing. For us, it may be helping out with Family

Promise. Or washing dishes in our kitchen on Sunday. Or being a tutor to help Mentor Me on Thursday evenings. Or helping to care for someone who can no longer care for themselves. There is no shortage of things that need to be done.

We simply need to remember these words from one of MLK's last sermons:

"If you want to be important, wonderful. If you want to be recognized, wonderful. If you want to be great, wonderful. But recognize that ***he who is greatest among you shall be your servant***. That's a new definition of greatness. And [today], the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve... You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant."

Let us now practice serving here in the church so that we can all carry it with us into our daily lives and serve those that we encounter. Amen.