

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In a dimly lit room in an undisclosed location, Jesus gathers with his disciples for what will be his last meal with them. He is fully aware of what is about to happen and he knows who will set it all in motion. There is great anticipation floating around Jerusalem at the moment because the long awaited Passover celebration will happen in just two days. Tomorrow is the day of preparation. The day when the lambs will be slaughtered for sacrifice in the Temple and for the Passover Meal. While Jesus is hanging on a cross tomorrow, the faithful will be presenting their sacrificial lambs to the Priests at the Temple for ritual slaughter. And in each home, the sacrificial lamb that will be consumed the following night at the Passover Meal that is being prepared. The sights and sounds and smells of intense anticipation cut through the night and only Jesus is fully aware of the parallel stories being played out in this most holy city on this most holy and sacred night.

Jesus and his disciples are engaged in their own kind of preparation, although the disciples are somewhat clueless about what is actually happening. They think they're lounging in an upper room preparing to indulge in a modest supper at the end of a long and tiring day. When Jesus begins to speak, they can't possibly be aware of both the gravity and the magnitude of his words. They can't possibly know their full meaning. This is Jesus' own day of preparation...preparing the disciples to carry on his and God's work without him. And preparing himself for the gruesome and torturous day that lies ahead for him when the night is over.

While the evening meal is still going on, Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe and ties a towel around himself. Jesus had already taken off the heavenly robe that was rightfully his and put on the humility of flesh and blood in order to be with us. His earthly robe is his human body. He knows that he will soon wear the heavenly robe again when he is once

more in the bosom of the Creator. But for now, he must show his disciples how their sins will be cleansed away by the God who loves them even as he washes their feet to cleanse the dirt from them. The washing of feet was an act of love and humble servitude. Just days ago, Mary had washed Jesus' feet with expensive and fragrant oil and then used her hair to wipe them dry. The washing of feet is a sign of love and great hospitality and it is the offering of a servant. Washing a guest's feet meant that there would be no barriers to the guest joining others lounging about a table on the floor. It was an act of inclusion...a way of drawing someone in to an intimate group. That was what Jesus was doing for his disciples...all of them...even the one who was about to betray him.

Jesus' reaction to this inner circle that has disappointed him over and over again during his ministry is not to scold or to chastise them, but to take a towel and a basin of water and wash their feet. He loves his own who are in the world and he loves them to the end...all of them. Only one, Peter, openly objects to what Jesus is doing. He's a bit outraged that Jesus would stoop so low...to do something so demeaning...to do something so obviously beneath him. But from Jesus' point of view, nothing is beneath him. Peter is so offended that he tells Jesus, "You will never wash my feet!" But what Peter doesn't yet understand is that cleansing the dirt off the feet of those he loves is, for Jesus, the same as cleansing the sin off their souls. When we refuse that cleansing, we cut ourselves off from the very source of power and love that allows us to heal others in Jesus' name. It's like refusing the forgiveness that God offers to us so generously. It's hard to accept forgiveness. It's humbling. Sometimes it's easier to be proud and haughty than it is to humble ourselves to accept forgiveness. And we are often harder on ourselves than we are on anyone else. Yet our refusal to forgive ourselves...our refusal to allow Jesus to wash us...is the very thing that stands in the way of our relationship with Jesus and with each other.

And Jesus has words for the disciples as he washes their feet. He tells them that just as he has washed their feet, they need to wash each other's feet. Just as Jesus has forgiven us and washed us clean, we are to forgive others and wash them clean. And we mustn't forget to wash

ourselves clean as well, just as Jesus taught us. We must be willing to accept that love, to embrace that love, to allow that love to empower us...and to let that love and forgiveness wash us clean. Jesus tells them to love one another as he has loved them.

This is commandment Thursday. That's where the name 'Maundy' comes from. It originates from the Latin word *mandatum* which means commandment. On this day before the Day of Preparation for Passover, Jesus is giving all of us a mandate...a commandment...love one another as I have loved you. "And when you drink the wine," he says, "remember me. Remember it is the blood of the New Covenant which is now between God and God's creation. It is shed for you. And when you break the bread and eat it, remember that it is my body which is broken for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Drink the wine and eat the bread...food for your souls. Do this in remembrance of me."

This night is a love feast. This meal is a love feast. It is all about God's love and forgiveness and God's burning desire to be reconciled to us. But God will not force it. God will offer it. It's up to us to decide whether or not we will take it in. Do we want a reconciliation with God? Do we want to follow Jesus in this life and into the life that lies ahead?

Jesus is giving us clear directions for what he wants us to do...what he expects us to do. He expects us to live with a heart filled with forgiveness, not just for others, but for ourselves as well. These are his instructions for us while he is away. His focus on this his last night with those he loves is not on himself, but on those he loves. He's letting us know how he wants us to behave while he is away in much the same way a parent gives instructions to their children before the parent leaves the house. "Don't hit your brother! Don't lock your sister out of the house!" We don't know how long he will be gone, but he has entrusted the welfare of the world to us. It's up to us to show others the kind of love and forgiveness that God has shown us. It is up to us to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. Because, as he said, "Everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

But there may be even more at stake in Jesus' actions on this night than simply setting an example. It may be that the salvation prepared by the Father and accomplished by the Son is in fact being played out right before our eyes. Salvation, in the gospel of John, comes through God's embrace of a hostile world...the kind of world in which we live today. Therefore, Jesus' death on the cross is not for one moment considered defeat or tragedy; rather it is the moment of his triumph and glorification. It is God's embrace of the world. It is not what we -- not what anyone! -- would expect! No one would expect that grace is revealed in suffering, that power is displayed through weakness, that glory is disguised in humiliation. And yet the God Jesus comes to reveal to us shows up exactly where we least expect God to be in order to redeem God's beloved creation from the Enemy that has subjected it to slavery and darkness.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.