

## “I Have Given You an Example”

Date: April 2, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 13:1-15

Occasion, Maundy Thursday, Yr. B

Theme: service, love

Today is Maundy Thursday. The word *maundy* is actually a corruption of the Latin word *mandatum*, from which we get the word “mandate.” It comes from the gospel of John where Jesus says, “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.” A new mandate, *mandatum novum*: to love one another.

In the opening lines of tonight’s gospel lesson we hear these words: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” The theme of **love** pervades the entire scene in the Upper Room.

What follows is Jesus teaching and demonstrating love for his disciples. It becomes an example for all who wish to follow Jesus. In the washing of the feet and the breaking of the bread, Jesus shows us his love; He demonstrates God’s love.

The Gospel lesson tonight is part of Jesus’ farewell address to his disciples. You might say that it is his last will and testament. Before he dies, he wants those who are closest to him to know what is most important to Him. It was for Jesus, his last chance to teach his disciples about the Kingdom of God. In essence, it’s all about love.

What happened prior to Jesus washing his disciples’ feet? What was it that induced our Lord to carry out this act of kindness that has so gripped the imagination of the church? We get a clue if we read about the Last Supper, over in the gospel of Luke.

In chapter 22 we find this tragic sentence: “A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” Grown men were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Scholars believe that it was this very argument that led Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet.

It helps to know that the roads of Palestine were unsurfaced and generally made of packed dirt. In dry weather they were inches deep in dust and in wet they were liquid mud. The shoes of the average person were sandals, mere soles held to the feet by a few leather straps. They gave little protection against mud or dust.

For that reason, there were always big jars of water outside the door of a house. A servant typically was outside, with a pitcher and towel to wash the feet of guests as they arrived. But among the small circle of Jesus’ friends, they had no servants. And so they usually took turns, washing each other’s feet.

It may well be that on the night of this last meal together, they had got themselves into such a state of pride and competition that no one was willing to accept the duty of taking water and towels to wash the feet of the others.

Too proud, too angry, too stubborn to break down and serve one another. So they reclined to eat with feet still dirty from travel. Our Lord could stand it no longer. You could cut the air with a knife, so thick was the feeling of animosity among the disciples.

In his hour of greatest need, when he needed the comfort of his friends, they were arguing about who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. How childish, and yet how human. Had they learned nothing from the time they had spent with Jesus?

How sad Jesus must have felt as he listened to them. Jesus got up from the table, took the water basin and a towel and began to wash their feet. As the disciples watched and realized what the Master was doing, surely they must have grown uncomfortable and uneasy. Yet curiously, no one spoke.

No one cried out, “No, wait, you shouldn’t do that. Let *me* do it.” And yet, slowly, one at a time, Jesus knelt in front of each disciple and washed their feet in turn. How hot their faces must have felt, embarrassed by what the Lord was doing to them, for them.

In that simple act of doing for them what they felt too proud to do for one another, Jesus revealed what true greatness actually is. Forever and for all time, Jesus showed that true greatness was not found in power or prestige, but in service to others.

The disciples were still thinking in terms of hierarchies, some greater and some lesser than others. But Jesus said, by his actions, those who are truly great are those who humble themselves and serve others.

No one spoke, until Jesus came to Peter. We could have predicted that Peter would have something to say, the man with the fire-y temper. Peter protests, feeling that Jesus shouldn’t demean himself in this way.

Poor Peter, he just doesn’t understand what’s being done here. He still hasn’t made the connection. He still doesn’t understand what kind of Messiah Jesus actually is.

Jesus, on his knees, humbly washing the feet of his followers, taking the role of a servant, typifies and exemplifies his whole life’s

work. Not today, but some day Peter will understand that he too must accept this way of life as being God's will.

And so it is with us. To be baptized is to take on the life and the ministry of Jesus, serving others in a spirit of love. We think a little less of ourselves and a little more of others. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be bathed by Him with the water of baptism.

And then, and then we are to take up our own towel and basin and wash the feet of others. The meaning of discipleship is clear from the example of Jesus, our Lord and Master. In humility, we are meant to serve others. Not counting the cost in terms of pride, but measuring greatness by deeds of self-less giving.

This is the blue-print for the life of the church, the life that we are meant to follow: imitating Jesus in his humility and his service. Jesus says, "I have given you an example; do as I have done."

We are never closer to God than when we love others. We are never closer to Christ our Lord, than when we are serving those in need. So I ask you, how is God calling you to take up a towel and water basin, to wash the feet of someone else?

Is it listening to a person who needs to unload their burden? Is it sharing food with someone who doesn't have enough? Is it volunteering your time to serve at the over-flow homeless shelter? Is it offering hope to someone who is discouraged?

Is God calling you to cry with someone who is grieving? Is God whispering in your ear, inviting you to send a card, make a phone call, or visit a person? Is God calling you to stand up against issues that oppress others: challenging racism, sexism, handicappism, or any other ism that robs a person of dignity and respect?

In just a few moments we will participate in a foot-washing service. Chris McClelland and I will be your servants tonight. You are invited to come forward and sit in the chair, with one shoe removed. We will pour a little water over your foot and then pat it dry.

You are invited to come and participate, or you may sit and watch as others come forward. Christ has given us an example that we should love one another, as he has loved us. That is the new commandment. He doesn't ask us to keep a bunch of rules, but to follow his example – to love one another, as he first loved us.

After washing their feet, Jesus blessed his disciples with the gift of bread and wine. It was a meal by which to remember Him, and his love. The sacrament of Holy Communion is the means by which Christ continues to serve us with his whole life.

Come to the table and partake of the gift of Christ, Himself, given for you and for me. And remember his words, "I have given you an example, that you should love one another." Amen.