

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Maundy Thursday - Year A

Exodus 12:1-4 [5-10] 11-14

Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19

I Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

04/06/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹²After he had washed their feet, he had put on his robe, and had returned to the

table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” ^{31b}“Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Maundy Thursday!

Good evening! What’s the difference between an experience that is foundational, and one that is defining? Yes, I realize we are splitting hairs here, but I do have a reason for this! Merriam-Webster writes that foundational is “*of, relating to, or forming or serving as a base.*”¹ Meanwhile, the definition of defining² is “*to determine or identify the*

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/foundational>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/defining>

essential qualities or meaning of.” For me, and for the point of this sermon, the key difference is that foundational can be understood as a base idea or ideas, parts of a larger whole, which while important, are still individual things. A defining experience is one that overpowers all others, that comes to represent the thing or person as a whole. When we think biblically, Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is a DEFINING moment. The Word becoming flesh is defining. But I would argue that the washing of the disciples feet serves as a foundational one.

Now, if you’re wondering why we’re even going down this rabbit hole, I have a reason. Maundy Thursday is tied for Trinity Sunday as my favorite worship experience all year long. As the week went along, and I began working on this sermon, I was trying to wrap my head around WHY that was the case. It became increasingly clear to me that this wasn’t because of any defining moment. It isn’t like on one blustery Maundy Thursday decades ago I saw a heavenly angel come down and perform a miracle. No, it was much more mundane. Little by little, time after time, experiences in my everyday life started to present a picture to me where Maundy Thursday embodied the principles of faith that I held most dear.

Here’s the thing, it’s not about washing feet. In fact, that’s my least favorite part. But what that washing REPRESENTS, what it says about Jesus, that’s the important thing for me. When the lesson as a whole are taken together, they form an important lesson. One scholar writes that *“Jesus’ exhortation is not to moral performance but to imitation of his self-gift. ‘Jesus’ death... as it is here interpreted through the foot washing, is the norm of life and conduct for the believing community.”*³ Another

³ Moloney, Francis J., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of John*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1998. p. 376.

commentator argues that the foot washing is a christological sign “*pointing beyond the particular event to the truth of Jesus’ identity.*”⁴ It’s not about washing feet, but about everything else, both before and after, that the action comes to represent.

Those actions are summed up perfectly in what Jesus says at the end of our Gospel lesson; “*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” Jesus has spent his ministry modeling a life of care, love, and service for every single person that he meets. Then, in his final meal before his arrest he gives them one more example of that love, then commands them to do exactly the same thing.

When it comes to the work of Jesus Christ, it can be tempting to dismiss the challenge of his actions by pointing out that “*of course he can do it! He’s the son of God!*” But in the text today he raises the bar for all of us. “*Just as I have loved you...*” HE is the model, the archetype.

You will notice that there is no institution of the Lord’s Supper here in the Gospel of John. Instead of a Passover meal with the disciples like in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke; we get tonight’s story, a story of loving service. For the writer of John, it was important that instead of sharing the Passover meal with his friends, his sacrifice on the cross happened on that day instead. In this gospel, Jesus IS the paschal lamb. The foundational experiences of his ministry build up to a defining moment... the cross, a story we continue tomorrow evening.

But tonight we celebrate the strange action of a religious leader who decides to take on the lowly role of a servant, cleaning the feet of his

⁴ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 618.

disciples. Gail R O'Day writes that *“by washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with the disciples that mirrors the intimacy of his relationship with God. It is in intimacy that discomforts Peter, because it overturns his conventional assumptions of roles and propriety.”*⁵ It’s a response I get, growing up I was the only guinea pig my pastor convinced to come get his feet washed every year. I remember how strange it felt, and I’ve seen the nervousness in people’s faces when they step forward in worship. But the beauty of it all is like I said before... It’s not about washing feet at all, but about a love shared in community, a love first shown to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who saw the dignity and value of everyone. A person who even washed the feet of the one who would betray him, because nothing could stand in the way of God’s love. Not getting a little dirty, not a betrayal, not beatings, and certainly not a cross. Amen.

⁵ Ibid. p. 619.