

Prelude to the Cross  
Maundy Thursday Tenebrae Service  
April 5, 2012  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: John 13:1-17, 34-35

Holy Week is full of memorable stories and memorable images. We take time to remember those stories tonight later in the service of Tenebrae. Each of the scriptures we will read is sure to bring vivid images to mind -- images, perhaps, from famous paintings we've seen or, perhaps, images we've sketched in our minds, images of what it was like in the Garden of Gethsemane or when the soldiers arrested Jesus or when Jesus lifted his eyes to the heavens as he hung on the cross.

The Gospel of John gives us another image. It's one we may overlook. On the Last Supper, Jesus did an unexpected thing. He rose from the table, wrapped a towel around his waist and stooped to wash the feet of his apostles.

The profound suffering of the passion overshadows this intimate scene. But I would offer that it is as telling as any other scene in this great drama of who Jesus was and is. Perhaps even more so -- because in this act, we are given a prelude to the cross.

The recurring question throughout the gospels and especially in Holy Week is: Who is Jesus? Is he the messiah? Is he the King of the Jews? Is he the son of God? Is he, really, the kind of trouble maker that should have put such fear into the hearts of the Romans? Is he really such a threat to the religious officials of the time.

As with the cross, John's account of Jesus' foot-washing answers those questions. Most of all, this humble act of caring reveals Jesus as, simply, one who came to love. And in that act, we are all given a new commandment -- to love as Jesus loved.

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Maybe Jesus picked Peter because he knew Peter would provide the perfect object lesson from which we all were to learn. Peter was always a good straight man for Jesus -- walking straight into whatever Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples.

After removing his outer garment, putting on the towel and pouring out the water, Jesus approached Peter, who was sitting at the table. We can hear Peter's shock in his words, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?", followed up by, "You will never wash my feet." A modern day equivalent would be, "Oh, no you don't!"

We see Jesus' true identity revealed here because, once again, Jesus was going against the ways of the world. Washing the dirt and dust from the feet of another was the work of a household slave. Disciples might *occasionally* do it for their teacher as a sign of respect -- but a teacher *never* did it for a student. Thus, we see Jesus revealed

even before the cross as one who is a master, but a servant master, one who is in charge but who asserts his authority through submission, one who is great but who stoops to perform the most humble – and even humiliating - task.

We see Jesus' true identity revealed in other ways in this humble yet outrageous act of his. We recognize Jesus in his response to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." In other words, Jesus is saying, "You must receive what I am doing for you. You must give up your pride and desperate attempt at control. You must let me clean you."

In the events that follow – Jesus' surrender to Pontius Pilate, his strength in the face of agony, his excruciating death on the cross -- Jesus says the same for all of us: "You must let me die for you if you are to be cleansed of your sins."

Like Peter, we're not good at receiving God's love in Christ, are we? We let our ego get in the way. We don't like making ourselves vulnerable. We don't like admitting that we need the love of God. Or we simply cannot get our minds around this how far God went for us in Christ.

Tonight and in the next three days, all of that – all of the ways we resist God's unconditional love – hits us squarely in the heart. Later on, when we hear those stories about Christ's submission for us, Christ's suffering for us, Christ's crucifixion for us, we are forced to come to terms with what Jesus told Peter: "You must let me do this for you."

Jesus' washing Peter's feet serves as a prelude to the cross and a revelation of Christ's true identity in one other way ... in the simple commandment that Jesus gives his disciples to explain his actions.

" 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Our modern word "mandate" is drawn from the Latin for "command." That is why today is called Maundy Thursday, because it is the day when we remember this new mandate, this new command, simply to love one another.

Here at Caldwell, we can hear that command, that mandate, as our first directive for a new century. This week, we celebrate the founding of the church - the election of its first elders 100 years ago April 4. Many of you participated in the 24-hour prayer vigil that ended this afternoon. Through that vigil, we opened the second century for Caldwell.

What could be a more appropriate preparation for our new century than prayer? And what could be a more appropriate mandate for that century in Christ than, simply, to love.

When we find ourselves crossways with other Christians locally or nationally on important policy and social issues, Jesus says, “Try just loving one another.”

When we feud with brothers and sisters in Christ over the way forward for our denomination, Jesus says, “Try just loving one another.”

When we must reconcile with each other within our own congregation, Jesus says, “Try just loving one another.”

When we quarrel and fight within our own homes, Jesus says, “Try just loving one another.”

When you find yourself at odds with the ways of the world and you don't know what to do, Jesus says, “Try just loving one another.”

We know – or, at least, I hope we know – that it isn't easy. Loving each other through our differences, disagreements and disappointments can be the hardest thing we ever try to do. But it was Jesus' 'new' command to his disciples before he was crucified and it can be our first mandate at the dawn of our second century.

Let us pray:

O Lord, from the very beginning you showed us a different kind of love. You came into the world in lowly circumstance, born in a barn and laid in a manger. And in Christ, you left this world, but only after washing your disciples' feet and dying on a cross. Create in us humble spirits that are modeled after Christ. Teach us to receive the cleansing you offer in both the water basin and on the cross. When you say the words, “You must let me do this for you,” heal us from anything that would stand in the way of your grace. And when we make our response more complicated than it needs to be, remind of Jesus' words, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love another.” Amen.