

"MAUNDY THURSDAY IS FOR FOOLS"

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

(04-01-21) Maundy Thursday

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Do you remember the story of the unnamed woman who took a jar of perfume and anointed Jesus' head with it? John's gospel says it was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus and that she poured the perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. In a way it prefigures the story we just heard read, of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. There's a different theological understanding of the action, Jesus isn't anointing his disciples in preparation for their death as Mary and the other unnamed women do in anointing him, in fact, what Jesus does for his disciples is an invitation to think about how they will live!

I'm not sure how often Maundy Thursday falls on April Fool's Day, but this year it does. And maybe it's appropriate, given what Jesus does and how the disciples react to it. During the middle of dinner, what's come to be known to us as the Last Supper, Jesus decides to do something unexpected. He strips off his outer garment and begins to wash the feet of his disciples. Now this just wasn't done, at least not the way Jesus was doing it. Normally servants washed the feet of guests. The host would provide the water and servants, slaves, would do the dirty work of cleaning the dusty, dirty, smelly feet of the guests. You certainly wouldn't expect the host to that work.

The disciples wouldn't have expected Jesus to wash their feet! It's beneath him, literally and figuratively. Masters don't kneel before their students and Jesus shouldn't be kneeling to wash the feet of his disciples. It's just not done! Peter, foolish Peter, at least he gets it. What do you think you're doing? Are you going to wash my feet? Never! Don't even think about it. Why wouldn't he say what he did? If we were there, don't you think we would have said the same thing? But Jesus counters, unless I wash you, you have no share with me. Of course, now Peter overreacts, that's what he does. Then not only my feet, but my hands and my head. If it means to be connected to Jesus, then Peter wants it all.

But he doesn't get it at all. It's not about how much of your body gets washed by Jesus, no amount of water is going to make us clean! It's about what Jesus demonstrates, what he embodies in that act of servanthood. Do you know what I have done to you, asks Jesus, and I can imagine a stunned silence among the disciples. If I, says Jesus, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Later on, Jesus reiterates his point. 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. By connecting the two, the washing of feet and love for one another, by being the one who washes feet and the one who in the ultimate act of love gave his life for us on the cross, Jesus directs us in how we should live. We, his disciples, then and now, we are to love one another as he has loved us. And the way we live in his love is by serving the other, by kneeling in humility before others, in washing feet, in giving of ourselves for the sake of the other.

The world would consider us fools to follow Jesus this way, but it's his way and so it has to be our way. But here's the thing, there's an order to this foolishness. Jesus begins by washing the feet of his disciples, by washing Peter's feet. Until Jesus washes his feet, he has no share with him. Peter needs to be washed by Jesus and Peter needs to witness Jesus loving him, even to death on the cross, the same Peter who will deny

Jesus publicly, the same Peter, who along with the others will barricade themselves behind locked doors out of fear, before Peter can be transformed by what he has received and what he has witnessed.

And it's the same for us, us fools as well. If we want to live in the way Jesus invites us to live, to love another, to wash each other's feet, to live as each other's servants, to love sacrificially, there's no amount of good will or good intention that by itself will allow us to live this way. The only way to live as people of Jesus' new commandment is to be a people who know what it is to have received the love of Jesus on the cross for ourselves personally.

Until we can confess that Jesus is our Lord, that he is our Master and Saviour, and that the one who is our Saviour has loved us to death, loved me to death, even death on the cross, we will not be able to live as Jesus intends. And yes, it will seem foolish to the world around us. The Apostle Paul put it well years later when he wrote to the church in Corinth, "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Now is a time for the followers of Jesus to love as he has loved us. Now is a time for those who are Christ's disciples to serve as we have been served by our Lord and Master. There are those who are easy to love, those closest to us, family, friends, loved ones. Then there are those for whom for us to love is neither easy nor difficult, just somewhat ambivalent. But then there are those who are hard, difficult, maybe even verging on for us, impossible to love. And yet we remember that Judas was in that room when Jesus washed the disciples' feet, just as Peter was. And we remember that Jesus didn't die on the cross only for some but for all. His love on the cross made it possible for all people, even the worst among us, to find redemption and restoration, forgiveness and peace, if we will accept God's grace and mercy, if we will say yes to God's love.

I know it won't be easy to live this way, to love this way. But as Jesus says, there is a way that people will know that we are his disciples, if we will love one another, if we will love as he has loved us. If the church is a community of God's good news, then we have no option but to love, to express compassion, to be merciful, to serve, to model a different approach, one that even might get us labeled as foolish. It won't be everyone's way, but it is our way. And before we start getting on our knees, let's make sure we have received what it is we hope to be giving away. Let's make sure that we are intimately familiar with Jesus' love so that we can open ourselves to loving one another.

Thanks be to God, Amen!