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Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
Maundy Thursday - Communion

1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 34-35

JUST AS

We have a mandate. The name Maundy Thursday comes from the occasion when Jesus gave his followers a mandate. John's Gospel tells us that on the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples, "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."

He said this after having washed the feet of his followers. John, at the beginning of his gospel account, had referred to Jesus as God's Word made flesh. Here was an occasion when he fleshed out what Godly love looks like. He delivers the gospel from the bottom up. And with the thought that we are to live out Christ's love just as he did, there may be some of you nervously looking to see if there are wash basins up here with the expectation that you will be asked to remove your shoes and get your feet wet. Rest easy, there are no plans for a literal foot washing this evening. I heard of a Christian women's group that decided they were going to do a foot washing ceremony. When the scheduled time occurred, half of the women didn't show up and the ones who did, had all gotten a pedicure beforehand. So no extemporaneous literal foot washing this evening, but tonight is a time to let it soak in that Christ loves us, even from the bottom up. And that love changes the way we are able to love others.

So what's going on with this foot washing that is described here and how does that help us know about fulfilling Jesus' commandment for us to love one another? In a land of dusty roads, it was a sign of hospitality that a house servant might offer to wash the feet of guests when they had journeyed to get to a certain location. But the host of a gathering would not have done that himself. However, Jesus takes on this servant role.

New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders helps us understand different forms of service. She says there is a model of service where the server would have been required to serve another because of some position or power that the latter was understood to have possessed. It was in this sense that slaves served their masters, that subjects served their rulers, and that the poor served the rich. In a patriarchal society, the understanding also was that women served men. There was a relationship of inequality between the two persons, and the service rendered actually reinforced that condition of inequality. The service rendered did not necessarily express any love.

There is a second model of service where the server does freely for the served because of some need perceived that the former has the ability to meet. It is in this sense that parents serve their children, professionals serve their clients, and the strong serve the weak. And yet, the basis of the service is still a relationship of inequality. The service rendered could be an expression of love, but it also could be motivated by pity, guilt, or a sense of responsibility.

But Jesus demonstrates a third model of service that puts aside inequality. He certainly was the rabbi or master relating to his followers, but that night, he took off his outer garments and knelt at their feet to carry out the role of a servant. He demonstrates that he wants what is good for each one of them and he shows the close relationship he desires with each one. His act is one of cleansing. They each allow themselves to be in Jesus' hands. Their master or teacher becomes their friend, even one who was willing to lay down his life for them.

In the story, we see Peter's reaction in which he insists that Jesus not wash his feet. It is reflective of human resistance to the self-giving love of God. But Jesus insists that Peter soak in and be cleansed by that love, for he needed to receive it in order to be able to give a similar love to others. It is also clear that Judas, the disciple who would betray his Lord, was also there when this expression of love was carried out. Jesus knows what he is going to do, and yet he goes forward with washing Judas' feet. He would love even his wayward ones through thick and thin all the way to the end.

This evening we see that as we willingly allow ourselves to be held in God's hands, it will be an experience where God lovingly draws us close. That experience can then enable us to lovingly reach out to our sisters and brothers in Christ, so that just as Jesus has given himself fully unto us, that we would be willing to give of ourselves to one another. It is the mandate that becomes a great joy to embody: let us love one another just as Jesus has loved us.