

John 13:1-17

Luke 22:14-23

¹⁴When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, ‘Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!’ ²³Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

John 13:1-17 *NRSV*

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to God. 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 God 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.’

¹² After he had washed their feet, 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.

This story from *John*, of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, it ends with v34-35 with these words:

³⁴Now, I 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.”

I would guess you have pondered this question at some point in your life: *If you knew you only had a few days left to live, what would you do?* Maybe as an icebreaker, or perhaps in your younger days when we are busier contemplating the vastness of the world and our place in it.

Or, similarly, we might talk about our “Bucket List”, those things we want to do before we die.

What would we do with only a few days left? Sometimes we answer this question with grand things – we would take one final trip somewhere, either to see something precious again – like the ocean, perhaps; or to see or experience something we hadn’t gotten around to yet – to sky dive, or see the pyramids – to eat nothing but desserts and foods high in sodium and trans-fats. My Grandparents have a trip planned to the Grand Canyon with their children this April – my Grandma went there once as a child, and would like to see it one more time.

Or, we might answer this question with a seeking of reconciliation: someone we would like to see or talk to once more before we die – perhaps someone whom we wish to ask forgiveness from, or to offer our forgiveness to. We might have some final words that we have yet to utter, or things that have been left unsaid.

Or, we might answer this question, of how we would spend our final few days on earth – to just soak in as much time with our loved ones as we can – to be in the presence of close family and friends – to see and hold each other, to laugh and cry together.

Jesus, knowing that he only had a few days left on earth, did not set off to see the Pyramids or to hug his mother one final time – Jesus, knowing he had precious little time left – chose to wash the feet of his disciples and eat a final Passover meal with them. Interesting choice, this – knowing he was on short time, that he was soon to “depart from this world and go to God”, to take on his cloak, stoop down and wash the feet of his students. This adds a bit of weight to these actions, I think, when we think about them in terms of what the author *John* tells us in verse 1, that Jesus has realized that his hour has come to depart this world. As chaos lies ahead: as the uncertainty of betrayal, arrest, and trial all lay ahead – in the fear and reality of this, Jesus chooses to share a meal with his closest disciples and to wash their feet.

To wash his disciples’ feet. We usually remember this once a year at our Maundy-Thursdays Service, the service of remembering the ‘New Commandment’ and reenacting it through the ritual of footwashing. As part of this service, I remind us a bit of the context – that *in first century Palestine, where roads were dusty and all common people walked from place to place, foot washing was quite common. When you would arrive at your destination, it was practice for there to be a basin of water where people could wash their feet upon entering someone’s home. Normally, people would wash their own feet. Occasionally, in an act of*

extraordinary devotion, a disciple would wash the feet of a teacher. Never would one expect a teacher or master to wash the feet of a disciple, student, or follower.

And so in this way, we see yet another example of Jesus enacting the Kingdom of God, the last being first and the first last – the Rabbi serving the disciple. But I think it is a bit more than this. We are told in *John* chapter twelve, just one chapter before this scene, that Jesus came to the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The author tells us that it was six days before the Passover – so only one in a literary sense it is one chapter before, in a timeline it is only 6 days prior – Jesus enters the home of Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. And they had a dinner for him. Martha served the dinner. But Mary – she took a pound of costly perfume and with it she anointed Jesus’ feet and she let down her hair, and used it to dry his feet. Just six days before Jesus washes the feet of the disciples he has his feet washed with perfume and hair by Mary.

Sometimes in the preaching event, especially in historical Black Preaching, preachers will use what they call their *Sanctified Imagination* to expound on a scripture. This is not a reading of the text that comes from using the historical or literary context, it is not a reading of the text that comes from reading commentaries or using the original Greek or Hebrew of the passage. It is a reading in which the preacher imagines what it might have been like to be there, or what might have been happening internally for a character – what might be happening in the internal struggle or reaction that leads to a certain action our outcome. The concept of a *Sanctified Imagination* asserts that our imagination is just as important a tool as intellect.

So, using my *Sanctified Imagination* – I wonder if this is actually the origin of the Christian practice of foot washing – that it began with Mary Magdalene washing Jesus’ feet. I don’t think there is much question that the proximity of these events is intentional by the author of *John*, and I think at the very least that as Jesus stoops to wash his disciples’ feet we are to remember what Mary had done for Jesus just six days earlier.

In my *Sanctified Imagination* I imagine Jesus being so moved by this act of love and devotion – that Jesus, as he is nearing his life’s end and the road that lies before him – I imagine that he is so moved by Mary’s anointing of his feet – he is so buoyed and held in that action of hers that six days later, as he knows he is in his final hours with his disciples:

- As he considers that question, “what will I do with my final hours?”
- What do I need to get through this?
- What do my disciples need to get through this?
- What do I still have left to teach them? To say to them?
- What do my disciples need so that they might respond out of transformation love, not vengeance? What do my disciples need to be able to hold together and continue to attend to the kingdom of God even when I am no longer with them?

As he contemplates all of this, and he remembers what Mary did for him, he remembers how her act of love and tenderness buoyed his spirits – how it carried him to continue to do what he had been called to do; how it sustained him in a growingly fearful and chaotic time; how it helped him to continue to walk the lonely and dark road toward Jerusalem.

And so perhaps, perhaps he wanted to give to his disciples a bit of what Mary had given to him:

- a reminder that they are beloved, that they are cherished
- that when Jesus is taken, they might respond from this place of belovedness rather than a place of fear and woundedness
- that Judas, after he has done his betraying, that he might feel forgiveness in the memory of the Master who loved him enough to wash his feet
- that Peter, after he has done his denying, that he might be renewed by remembering the Master who loved him enough to wash his feet
- that in the confusion and fear that is about to come, they will be sustained by the moment when the Master held their feet in his hands – and they too will be able to continue to attend to the work to which they have been called.
- that when they want to respond with revenge or violence, or when they want to give up and go home – they will be buoyed by Jesus' act of love at their feet

We certainly live in a time of much chaos, a bombardment of seemingly hopeless news – a time when the children of our country are killed because of a terrible love of guns; a time when the children of the world are killed because of our terrible love of war and power; a time when we let 40% of our food rot away in landfills while children in other parts of the world suffer death of starvation; a time when we look to blame, rather than to understand.

I will say that for myself, I have felt particularly defeated this week – not from guns or drones or new proposed Idaho laws, but from feeling like I have bumped up against the limits of

my own love and compassion. As we have continued to work with people sleeping in front of Corpus Christi House at night, in dealing with this for five months and having to continually clean-up after people each morning, I recognize that my feelings of compassion are being slowly strangled by feelings frustration. It is a defeating feeling to have to preach on Jesus' "New Commandment" when you recognize that your reservoir of love has hit drought levels.

And so as we continue to try to be people of love in a world of chaos – as we come to moments when we bump-up against the limits of our own human love by the on-slaught of fear and frustration, or by exhaustion and weariness:

- It might be that you are called to offer to someone else, an act of love that was once given to you – that just as Jesus passed on what Mary had done for him – perhaps what you need to sustain yourself is to do likewise.
- Or, it may be that you simply need to be reminded of the Christ who stooped to wash the feet of his disciples – this loving act of service done by the Master.
- Or perhaps, in your own sanctified imagination, you need to picture the hands of Christ slowly massaging those aching parts of your feet, until you are able to walk once again in love in the ways to which you have been called.
- Or it may be that you need to be reminded from this passage that as followers of Christ we are not people of the Golden Rule but people of this New Commandment – we are not simply called to treat others with respectful reciprocity, but to treat others by the love of Christ – the love which stoops down to hold their dirty and aching feet in our hand.

- Or, perhaps, when you come to feel the limits of your own human ability to love, it might be that you simply need to remember that even Jesus himself needed the support and love from another – that he needed that loving act of Mary to help sustain him to continue that to which he had been called.

May we be a people of this New Commandment, known to the world for our love for one another. May we be a people of Mary, offering an outpouring of love and devotion where it is needed. Amen and amen.